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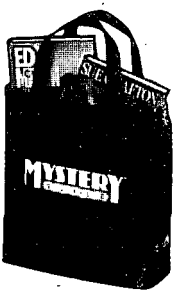

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Cover Illustration by
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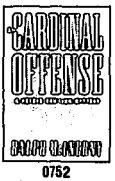

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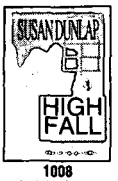

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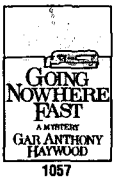

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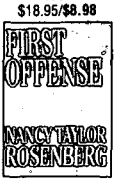

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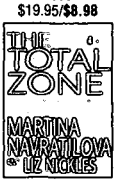

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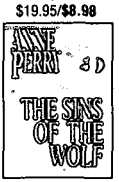

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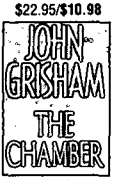

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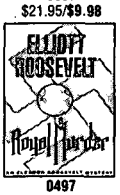

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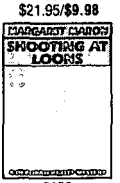

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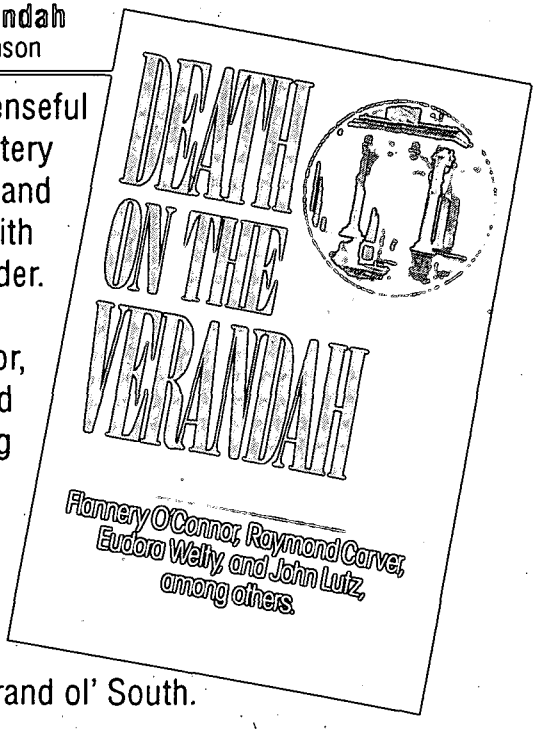

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THE WOMEN AT THE FUNERAL

by ROBERT BARNARD

Alice Furnley closed her brother's eyes and turned to her sisters. "He'll be in Heaven now," she said.

The two younger sisters nodded. There was no doubt about that. They went into the next bedroom to tell their mother, who had been expecting it.

"If only I could have gone first," she said, tears running down her wrinkled cheeks. "But there—it's God's will. He'll be one more saint in the holy choir."

They all murmured their assent, without hesitation or reservation. They knew their brother Roderick had been a man of singular gentleness and boundless charity. His consideration for his old mother and his sisters was much commended in the parish: the old lady was eighty-two, and very frail; two of his sisters were spinsters and the other had been early widowed. They all lived together in the large house and grounds in Acacia Avenue, in great harmony. "We never had an unkind word from him," Alice told the vicar, who had prayed for him the previous Sunday at St. Michael's. He had described Roderick as a man of boundless goodness and of good works, an example to them all. His sisters, in the family pew, had

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nodded. They were women of faith, of certainties, and their minds were not enquiring ones.

Alice's first uneasiness came at the funeral service, or rather just after it. There had been many tears shed during the address and the prayers, for many at St. Michael's, not just his sisters, felt they had lost a brother: he had been counsellor and confessor to many of them, had given solid aid to more than a few. The vicar had meditated, to no very good effect, on the ways of God, particularly in taking to himself so admirable a man at the early age of fifty-two. As the coffin was borne down the aisle and out to the churchyard for burial, the congregation held back to allow the mourning women of the family to follow it. Sarah and Emily, the two younger sisters, helped their old mother along, and were preoccupied, but Alice could look around her, could see that the church was three-quarters full, and, as she came to the pews at the back, could get a good view of the unknown women.

They were sitting together, nine or ten of them, and they were clearly uncertain what to do at a funeral, or even in church. They had gone to some effort to make their dresses appropriate to the occasion: black or brown skirts, little dark hats or head scarves. But they were not at all the class of women that Alice would have expected at her brother's funeral, and they were not—Alice found it difficult to find a way of putting it to herself—they were not, they didn't *look*, respectable. She went out into the bitter December wind.

There was no question of celebrating Christmas that year. Most of the customary seasonal indulgences were cancelled, and those that could not be were consumed soberly, often with sad comment about how much Roderick had always enjoyed this or that. Alice said nothing to her sisters about the women in the church, but she felt weighed down by her secret. On Boxing Day the tradespeople and roundsmen were tipped by Alice, through Cook, with particular generosity, which she felt her brother would have expected. It was on that day, in the late afternoon, that she had a visitor.

Mary, the little maid, quite new from one of Dr. Barnardo's establishments, looked more than a little confused.

"Wouldn't give no name, miss, said it wouldn't mean anything to you. But she asked special to speak to you alone, miss. She's not—"

"Not what, Mary?"

"Not—not like one of us. Not a lady, Miss."

And that, in the year 1891, presented a problem. *Where* was this talk to take place? Not in the drawing room, surely, especially as one of her sisters might come in at any time.

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"Show her into Mr. Roderick's study," Alice said. "And tell my sisters I am busy."

Alice was not new to taking household decisions, but this one was unexpected, outside her usual scope. She felt almost nervous as she waited in the study. When the young woman was shown in she knew at once it must be one of the ones she had seen at the back of the church: she had on the same sort of dull, dun clothes and the same look of cleanliness achieved with effort. Now, as then, the visitor was not at ease.

"I thought as how I should come, Miss Furnley," she said, from just inside the door, "in case you were worried or upset about the will."

"The will? My brother's will?" Alice heard uneasiness in her voice and repressed it firmly. "We have had no time to see the family solicitor as yet. Christmas, you understand . . ."

"Oh, I see. Well, I'm glad, miss, because you might have wondered . . ."

"Wondered?"

"Oh, no need to be uneasy, miss."

Alice drew herself up.

"I am not uneasy. Merely bewildered what my brother's will can have to do with you."

"O' course, miss. Well, you see, he told me as how he was going to leave me something. Oh, not a great sum. Something you could easily afford."

"I see." But it was said faintly, and Alice Furnley clearly could not see.

"And o' course it's not for me, not for myself."

"He left you money, but not for yourself?"

"That's right, miss. It's because he knew he could trust me, and because I know a bit about banks and accounts and that. It's for me to keep, to help any of us girls."

"Any . . . of . . . you . . . girls," said Alice, more faintly still.

"If we're in trouble," said the woman, growing almost confiding. "In the nature o' things, a lot of us get into trouble from time to time."

"You do?"

"Us being independent girls, working on our own, on the streets a lot. . . . There's a lot of rough men around in Leeds, you know, miss."

"I know *that*. I see them."

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"That's all you want to do, miss. Anyway, there's lots of us girls have been helped over a bad patch by your brother—when we've been swindled, or beaten up, or put in 'orspital—that's when they'll take us in there. And he knew, when he was beginning to feel poorly, that if he left the money to me I'd keep it and give it or lend it as the need arose."

"I see." Alice began walking up and down the little room to get a better look at the woman. She did indeed look honest. Rough but honest. "Let me get this right: my brother has left you a sum of money—"

"A thousand pounds."

"A thousand pounds! My brother has left this sum to you so that you may relieve the distress of your . . . sisters."

"My friends, like. He didn't trust the churches and organisations. He said there was always strings attached."

"That sounds like Roderick." Alice was getting her confidence back. That did sound like Roderick. He was always direct and warm in his charities. This must be one he preferred—perhaps naturally—not to tell his womenfolk about. "He was so generous," she said. "So open."

"Oh, he was! Is this his room?" The woman looked around the book-lined little office, with copies of old *Punch*es, pipes and boots, and a chessboard by the fire. "I can imagine him in it. We all worshipped him!"

"All?"

"All the girls he was kind to. He never gave a lecture with it, that was the great thing, and you knew he was there in need."

"That's true."

"And he was always very considerate and gentle in—you know, personal things."

Alice could not begin to think what she meant, so she stayed silent.

"Oh, you mustn't think badly of him," said the woman, hurriedly. "All he wanted was a bit of comfort, a bit of relaxation, like." Seeing the bewilderment, then the horror, on Alice's face, she turned to go. "I won't take up any more of your time. Oh—just one more thing. That business with Mr. Johnston. He told me he was going to tell you about that, and I'm the only other one who knows. I swear to God it'll go no further. The man's quite safe as far as I'm concerned, and always will be."

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And she marched out, showing herself out through the front door. Alice watched her safely to the end of Acacia Avenue, then sank exhausted into a chair. What had she meant—*comfort? Relaxation?* Just when she had reconciled herself in her mind to the idea that Roderick had quietly been dispensing charity to women who—to *fallen* women (that must, surely, be what this woman had implied), then came this new revelation: that he had gone to this woman—these women—for comfort and relaxation. What could that mean except—? Impossible to believe!

Yet even as she told herself that, Alice remembered those late evenings of Roderick's at the Liberal Club twice a week. And remembered too that her brother had never felt the need to be particularly active in the party cause at election time, nor had he ever showed great familiarity with the Liberal candidate, or even with party officials when he met them.

Alice took the decision to go to the family solicitor next day and take only her sister Sarah—her once-married sister—with her. When the main provisions of the will were read, the division of the estate into three equal portions for his sisters, the two women nodded: they had known that was what Roderick had intended. When the will said that the deceased trusted his dear sisters' generosity to give adequate remembrances of himself to the family's servants and dependents, Alice whispered: "We must give them something they'll be *very* pleased with." And when one thousand pounds was left to Mrs. Sally Hardwick, of Crow Lane, Armley, Alice whispered: "One of the poor people Roderick was always so kind to—large family, father dead." If Sarah Furnley thought that one thousand pounds was an awful lot of money to leave a poor family, even a fatherless one, she said nothing: it would have been unseemly, almost blasphemous, to question Roderick's judgment.

The next day Alice went to the bank and on her return gave seventy-five pounds to Cook, fifty pounds to the ladies' maid, the same to Frank the gardener, and ten pounds to little Mary, with strict instructions to save most of it against the time a respectable young man asked her to marry him.

Which left Alice with the problem of Mr. Johnston. What on earth could the woman—could Sally Hardwick—have meant? The Furnleys had no close friends called Johnston. Racking her brains, Alice could recall that there was a Mr. Johnston among the congregation at St. Michael's. He was a bachelor and an elderly man, almost as old as their mother. Surely there could be no secret con-

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cerning him that Roderick had kept? She looked in trade directories, asked Walter Wakeham, who now ran the family clothing manufactory, if he knew of a Mr. Johnston that her brother Roderick was close to. All to no avail. It was a blank wall. When she decided that the woman could have got it wrong, or she have misheard, and it was a Mr. *Johnson* who was meant, her perplexity increased. There were just too many Johnsons around—and even so, no family or man of that name with whom the Furnleys had been close.

It seemed like an unsolvable puzzle. Alice could think of nothing more she could do, short of employing a private detective. But she had the impression that these were most unsavoury individuals who would not scruple to use any discreditable information they found out against their employer, so she put that possibility from her mind. Though she acknowledged to herself her own helplessness, she found that the name Johnston jumped out at her from the pages of the *Leeds Advertiser* or the *Yorkshire Post* in the way that names one is interested in have a habit of doing (other names which thus leapt off the page for Alice Furnley were the Prince of Wales and Marie Corelli, whose novels she found painfully exciting).

But it was not from the pages of a newspaper that the name of the Johnston she had been looking for sprang at her. She was sitting in the family pew at St. Michael's in early autumn, praying for her mother, whose life was drawing to a sad close, and the vicar was reading the banns of marriage:

"Francis Johnston, bachelor of this parish, to Ellen Currey, spinster of this parish . . ."

Alice had started involuntarily at the name and looked around. Her sister Emily smiled and patted her arm. "Frank," she said. "Isn't it nice?" Alice nodded and subsided into her pew.

Frank the gardener. She knew he had got engaged to a girl—no, to a woman—who worked for old Mrs. Macklin round the corner in Galton Road. She'd heard the name Ellen—that was why several bells had rung when the banns were read. Because she had never to her knowledge heard Frank's surname: he had always been "Frank" to her, and nothing more. She might, if she racked her brain, remember little Mary's surname (probably a gift of the good Dr. Barnardo); but Frank was outdoor staff, and as such she had had little to do with him beyond an occasional commending of his diligence or the excellence of his Brussels sprouts.

It was three days before Alice had matured a plan of action in her mind. Sarah was shopping in Leeds and Emily was nursing

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their mother when she ventured into the long, leafy garden that stretched from the back of the house. Frank was busy separating daffodil bulbs and she approached him circuitously, collecting a little bunch of autumn flowers in a basket. As she drew near him he straightened himself respectfully. He was about middle height, strong and capable-looking, but with strongly etched lines on his face that gave him an unhappy air.

"I was so glad to hear the banns read for you, Frank," Alice said.

"Thank you very much, miss."

"You must be looking forward to a happier time ahead."

There was a tiny pause before Frank said: "I am that."

"Because you've had a lot of trouble in the past, haven't you?"

This time there was a quite measurable pause before Frank said: "Did Mr. Roderick tell you about that? He said he was going to when he . . . took me on, then he changed his mind. Said he thought it would worry you, and you wouldn't understand."

"Before he died he told me," lied Alice, mentally excusing herself by her *need* to know. "He thought it was his duty, you see, as we would be left alone."

"I see, miss. I'm sure Mr. Roderick would always do what was right."

"But it was a very brief account—him being so weak. I didn't really understand the *circumstances* of your . . . problem."

"It must have sounded bad enough, miss, without the circumstances." Frank drew his sleeve across his forehead, which was beaded with sweat. "And it *was* bad, I acknowledge that freely. We were farm workers, you see, from down Lincolnshire way, me and my wife." Alice tried not to let it show that she was surprised he had had a wife, having been proclaimed a bachelor in her own church. "We were never well-off, but when this depression hit the farmers we got poorer and poorer, hungrier and hungrier. I was just about to leave, to try and find work in town, when it happened."

He looked at her as if hoping that she would supply the words he didn't want to say. Alice could only nod.

"First the boy, then the little girl—the light of my life. I won't say they died of hunger, but they were powerful weak when the influenza struck. We'd been going to lose our cottage the week after, but the farmer gave us another month, out of compassion. My poor wife was mad wi' grief, tearing her hair, miss, and crying from noon to night. As the time came for us to lose our home she kept saying 'I don't want to live' and 'There's nothing left to live for.' And—to

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cut a long story short—we came to a sort of agreement."

"A suicide pact," whispered Alice, stunned by the wickedness of the idea.

"That's what they called it in court. We didn't have the words for it, not being educated people. I was willing, miss—didn't take no persuading. I had nothing to live for either. We went down to a little coppice, I wi' my gun, we kissed for the last time, and I shot her. It were like putting an animal out of its misery. I were just seeing that she was really dead, not going to come round, when the farmer ran up, wrestled the gun from me, and forced me back to the farm. I pleaded with him to let things take their course, but he locked me up and fetched the authorities."

"But you were not—?" Alice began faintly.

"Hanged? No, miss. That were the sentence, but it was commuted. Maybe it'd have been better for all if it had been carried out. I got fifteen years hard labour, and if my life had been hell before—pardon my language, miss—it was double hell in jail. I served three years, and if I could have ended my life I would have done it. They made sure I couldn't. But I got away while I was in prison in York—escaped from a working party. It's easier if you don't care if they shoot you or not."

"But how did my brother come to know about you?"

He twisted the cap which he was holding in his hand.

"That was through a . . . lady I knew and he knew. She told him my story, and he offered me this job. He was a saint, your brother, miss."

Alice made noises that she hoped sounded like assent. Once it would have been spontaneous, full-hearted agreement.

"I had my own contacts by then. I gave myself a new name and got a birth certificate to prove it. I can never forget my poor wife, and my lovely children, but now I've got the chance of a new life. I'm very fond of Ellen, and I mean to take it."

"Yes. Yes, of course. Thank you for telling me all this. I wish you luck in the future."

And Alice made her way back to the house more directly than she had come from it. She went straight to her bedroom, sat by the little fire there, and tried to compose her thoughts. Her overwhelming feeling was anger: her brother had introduced into the house a murderer—a dreadful man who had killed his own wife, served only part of his prison sentence, and was in effect a convict on the run. And now a household of women—and Roderick had always been the

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sickly one, had often said he would be the first to go—had been left through his lack of thought or consideration with a brutal killer whom they daily came into contact with. She had not been able to say so to Johnston, for she would not have brought out into the open a disagreement with her late brother, but she thought it was *wicked*. It was contempt of the law, it was endangering his own family, it was condoning the sin of suicide. She could never, ever, think well of her brother again.

Meanwhile there was daily life to be got through, and a decision to be made about that. That decision bothered Alice sorely. She could hardly give Johnston up to the law, which was her first instinct: that would be to go against her brother's judgment totally and publicly, and she had always deferred to him as the eldest and as the head of the house. It would also reveal the shaming fact that he had connived in defeating the proper workings of justice.

And yet, to have the man *there*, working around the house, to see him every day, a man who had killed his own wife. Alice could hardly bear to go out into her own garden.

In the end it was Johnston who ended the awkward situation. He contrived to be in the front garden when she was coming home from a sewing bee at the vicarage a week after their conversation.

"Oh, Miss Furnley, could I have a word?"

"Well, er . . . I'm very busy . . . a *quick* one, Johnston."

"I can see, miss, that you're not happy about . . . what we spoke about. No reason why you should be. I should have told you when we were talking that before he died, when he knew the tuberculosis had come back, your brother talked to me, said he wanted me to be set up in a small way, so as to be independent. He gave me seven hundred and fifty pounds. Walked away when I tried to thank him. Well, there's a small market garden I've had my eye on, and I've managed to buy it with part of the money. My wife and I will be able to live off that, and I'll be out of your way, not in front of your eyes every time you look out of the window."

Alice was surprised at the perceptiveness of this rough man, but of course she could not say so. She said: "I wish you well in the future then, Johnston, and I'll advertise on Saturday for a replacement."

And that, though it did not exactly solve the problem, made it much less pressing. She had other things to occupy her mind. Her old mother died before the next Christmas, and the daughters were left alone in the house. Sarah married again, not wisely or well, and within five years was back again. The younger sisters died first,

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but Alice lived on and on, ramrod straight, sharp of eye.

She saw Johnston from time to time, sometimes with his wife, eventually with children. She nodded to him graciously, in a way that did not encourage the exchange of words. Johnston himself never attempted that. The only time they talked was when she was a very old lady, in her late eighties, still walking the streets of Leeds dispensing charity to the deserving poor and attending church as one of the dwindling congregation of St. Michael's. The slaughter of young men which was the Great War had gone, and so had the influenza epidemic which had slaughtered less unfairly as to sex. It was in the middle of the gay twenties, which were not particularly gay in Leeds, that she came upon Johnston, now a bent man in his seventies, with a bright, forceful young man, walking down Boar Lane. On an impulse she stopped.

"It's Johnston, isn't it?"

"That's right, Miss Furnley."

"And is this your son?"

"It is—Sam, our youngest."

"A prop for your old age. You are so fortunate. So many of my friends lost sons and grandsons in the War."

"I were just too young to serve, miss," said Sam. "Thank God."

"That is not a very patriotic sentiment," said Alice Furnley severely. "I sometimes think the dead were the lucky ones. 'They carried back bright to the coiner the mintage of man,' as the poet says. They never grew old and tarnished, as so often happens."

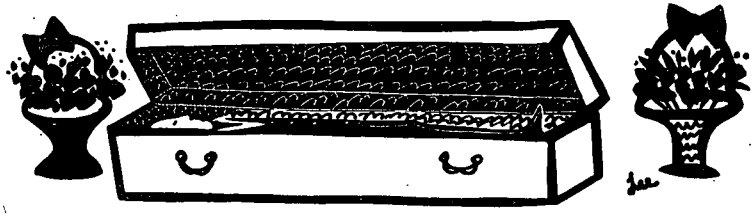
She looked meaningfully at Johnston. He stared doggedly back.

"If you mean your brother, miss, he went to his Maker as bright as any man ever did."

"Oh come, Johnston, you know that's not true," she said, in a low voice, preparing to pass on. "You of all people know that."

And she marched on, serenely continuing about her business.

"Silly old biddy," said young Sam. And for once his father did not reprove him.



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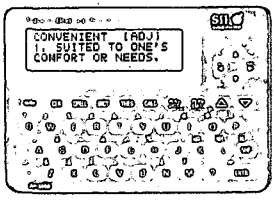

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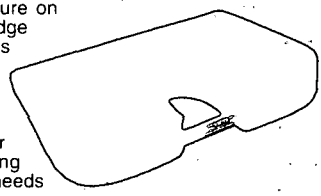

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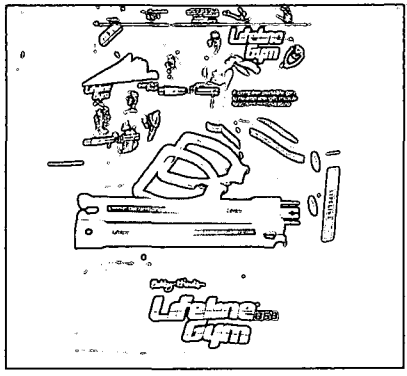

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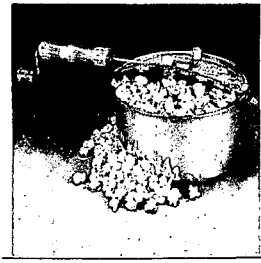

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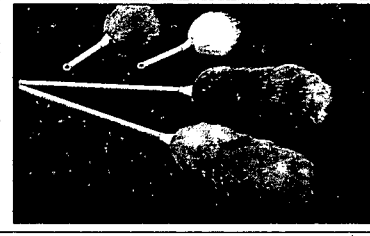

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A former attorney, Jeffery Deaver is the author of ten suspense novels and a two-time Edgar Allan Poe Award nominee. He joins us for the first time with a story that will be published later this year in the anthology Crimes of the Heart *(Berkley Books) . . .*

TOGETHER

by JEFFERY DEAVER

"A few people, a very few people're lucky enough to find a special kind of love. A love that's . . . more. That goes beyond anything that ever was."

"I suppose so."

"I *know* so. Allison and me, we're in that category." Manko's voice dropped to a discreet whisper as he looked at me with his barracks-buddy grin. "I've had a barrelful of women. You know me, Frankie boy. You know I've been around."

Manko was in the mood to perform and all I could do was play both straight man and audience. "So you've said, Mr. M."

"Those other girls, looking back, some of 'em were lovers. And some were just, you know, for the night. Wham, bam. That sort of thing. But till I met Allison, I didn't understand what love was all about."

"It's a transcendent love."

"Transcendent." He tasted the word, nodding slowly. "What's that mean?"

Just after I'd met Manko I'd learned that while he was poorly read and generally uninformed, he never hesitated to own up to his ignorance. That was my first clue as to the kind of man he was.

"It's exactly what you're describing," I explained. "A love that rises above what you normally see and experience."

"Yeah. I like that, Frankie boy. Transcendent. That says it. That's what we've got. You ever love anyone that way?"

"Sort of. A long time ago." This was partially true. But I said nothing more. Although I considered Manko a friend in some ways, our souls were worlds apart and I wasn't going to share my deepest personal life with him. Not that it mattered, for at the moment he was

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more interested in speaking about the woman who was the center of his own solar system.

"Allison Morgan. Allison *Kimberly* Morgan. Her father gave her a nickname. Kimmie. But that's crap. It's a kid name. And one thing she isn't is a kid."

"Has a Southern sound to it." I'm a native of North Carolina and went to school with a bevy of Sally Mays and Cheryl Annes.

"It does, yeah. But she's not. She's from Ohio. Born and bred." Manko glanced at his watch and stretched. "It's late. Almost time to meet her."

"Allison?"

He nodded and smiled the trademarked, toothy Manko smile. "I mean, you're cute in your own way, Frank, but if I gotta choose between the two of you . . ."

I laughed and repressed a yawn. It *was* late—eleven-twenty. An unusual hour for me to be finishing dinner, but not to be engaged in conversation over coffee. Not having an Allison of my own to hurry home to, or anyone other than a cat, I often watched the clock slip past midnight or one A.M. in the company of friends.

Manko pushed aside the dinner dishes and poured more coffee.

"I'll be awake all night," I protested mildly.

He laughed this aside and asked if I wanted more pie.

When I declined, he raised his coffee cup. "My Allison. Let's drink to her."

We touched the rims of the cups with a ringing clink.

I said, "Hey, Mr. M, you were going to tell me all 'bout the trouble. You know, with her father."

He scoffed. "That son of a bitch? You know what happened."

"Not the whole thing."

"Don'tcha?" He dramatically reared his head back and gave a wail of mock horror. "Manko's falling down on the job." He leaned forward, the smile gone, and gripped my arm hard. "It's not a pretty story, Frankie boy. It's not outta *Family Ties* or *Roseanne*. Can you stomach it?"

I leaned forward too, just as dramatically, and growled, "Try me."

Manko laughed and settled into his chair. As he lifted his cup the table rocked. It had done so throughout dinner but he only now seemed to notice it. He took a moment to fold and slip a piece of newspaper under the short leg to steady it. He was very meticulous in this task. I watched his concentration, his strong hands. Manko was someone who actually enjoyed working out—lifting weights, in his

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case—and I was astonished at his musculature. He was about five-six and, though it's hard for men—for me at least—to appraise male looks, I'd call him handsome.

The only aspect of his appearance I thought off-kilter was his haircut. When his stint with the Marines was over, he kept the unstylish crewcut. From this, I deduced his experience in the service was a high point in his life—he'd worked factory and mediocre sales jobs since—and the shorn hair was a reminder of a better, if not an easier, time.

Of course, that was my pop-magazine-therapy take on the situation. Maybe he just liked short hair.

He now finished with the table and eased his strong, compact legs out in front of him. Manko the storyteller was on duty. This was another clue to the nature of Manko's spirit: though I don't think he'd ever been on a stage in his life, he was a born actor.

"So. You know Hillborne? The town?"

I said I didn't.

"Southern part of Ohio. Pisswater river town. Champion used to have a mill there. Still a couple factories making, I don't know, radiators and things. And a big printing plant, does work for Cleveland and Chicago. Kroeger Brothers. When I was in Seattle I learned printing. Miehle offsets. The four- and five-color jobs, you know. Big as a house. I learned 'em cold. Could print a whole saddle-stitched magazine myself, inserts included, yessir, perfect register and not one goddamn staple in the centerfold's boobs. . . . Yessir, Manko's a hell of a printer. So there I was, thumbing 'cross country. I ended up in Hillborne and got a job at Kroeger's. I had to start as a feeder, which was crap, but it paid thirteen an hour and I figured I could work my way up.

"One day I had an accident. Frankie boy, you ever seen coated stock whipping through a press? Zip, zip, zip. Like a razor. Sliced my arm. Here." He pointed out the scar, a wicked-looking one. "Bad enough they took me to the hospital. Gave me a tetanus shot and stitched me up. No big deal. No whining from Manko. Then the doctor left and a nurse's aide came in to tell me how to wash it and gave me some bandages." His voice dwindled.

"It was Allison?"

"Yessir." He paused and gazed out the window at the overcast sky. "You believe in fate?"

"In a way I do."

"Does that mean yes or no?" He frowned. Manko always spoke plainly and expected the same from others.

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"Yes, with qualifiers."

Love tamed his irascibility and he grinned, chiding good-naturedly, "Well, you better. Because there *is* such a thing. Allison and I, we were fated to be together. See, if I hadn't been running that sixty-pound stock, if I hadn't slipped just when I did, if she hadn't been working an extra shift to cover for a sick friend . . . if, if, if. . . . See what I'm saying? Am I right?"

He sat back in the creaky chair. "Oh, Frankie, she was fantastic. I mean, here I am, this like four-inch slash in my arm, twenty stitches, I could've bled to death, and all I'm thinking is she's the most beautiful woman I ever saw."

"I've seen her picture." He'd showed it to me a dozen times. But that didn't stop him from continuing to describe her. The words alone gave him pleasure.

"Her hair's blond. God blond. Natural, not out of a bottle. And curly but not teased like some high-hair slut. And her face, it's heart-shaped. Her body . . . Well, she has a nice figure. Let's leave it at that." His glance at me contained a warning. I was about to assure him that I had no unpure thoughts about Allison Morgan when he forgot his jealousy. He added, "She's twenty-one years old."

Echoing my exact thought, he added sheepishly, "Kind of an age difference, huh?"

Manko was thirty-seven—three years younger than I—but I learned this after I'd met him and had guessed he was in his late twenties. It was impossible for me to revise that assessment upward.

"I asked her out. There. On the spot. In the emergency room, if you can believe it. She was probably thinking, How d' I get rid of this bozo? But she was interested, yessir. A man can tell. Words and looks, they're two different things, and I was getting the capital M message. She said she had this rule she never dated patients. So I go, 'How 'bout if you married somebody and he cuts his hand in an accident and goes to the emergency room and there you are? Then you'd be *married* to a patient.' She laughed and said, no, that was somehow backwards. Then this emergency call came in, some car wreck, and she had to go off to another ward.

"The next day I came back with a dozen roses. She pretended she didn't remember me and acted like I was a florist delivery boy. 'Oh, what room are those for?'

"I said, 'They're for you . . . if you have *room* in your heart for me.' Okay, okay, it was a bullshit line." The rugged ex-Marine fiddled awkwardly with his cup. "But, hey, if it works, it works."

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I couldn't argue with him there.

"The first date was magic. We had dinner at the fanciest restaurant in town. A French place. It cost me two days' pay. It was embarrassing 'cause I wore my leather jacket and you were supposed to have a suit coat. One of *those* places. They made me wear one they had in the coat room and it didn't fit too good. But Allison didn't care. We laughed about it. She was all dressed up in a white dress, with a red, white, and blue scarf around her neck. Oh God, she was beautiful. We spent, I don't know, three, four hours easy there. She was pretty shy. Didn't say much. Mostly she stared like she was kind of hypnotized. Me, I talked and talked, and sometimes she'd look at me all funny and then laugh. And I'd realize I wasn't making any sense 'cause I was looking at her and not paying any attention to what I was saying. We drank a whole bottle of wine. Cost fifty bucks."

Manko had always seemed both impressed by and contemptuous of money. Myself, I've never come close to being rich, so wealth simply perplexes me.

"It was the best," he said dreamily, replaying the memory.

"Ambrosia," I offered.

He laughed as he sometimes did—in a way that was both amused and mocking—and continued his story. "I told her all about the Philippines, where I was stationed for a while, and about hitching around the country. She was interested in everything I'd done. Even—well, I should say *especially*—some of the stuff I wasn't too proud of. Grifting, perping cars. You know, when I was a kid, going at it. Stuff we all did."

I held back a smile. Speak for yourself, Manko.

"Then all of a sudden, the sky lit up outside. Fireworks! Talk about signs from God. You know what it was? It was the Fourth of July! I'd forgotten about it 'cause all I'd been thinking about was going out with her. *That's* why she was wearing the red, white, and blue. We watched the fireworks from the window."

His eyes gleamed. "I took her home and we stood on the steps of her parents' house—she was still living with them. We talked for a while more, then she said she had to go to bed. You catch that? Like she could've said, 'I have to be going.' Or just 'Goodnight.' But she worked the word *bed* into it. I know, you're in love, you look for messages like that. Only in this case, it wasn't Manko's imagination working overtime, no sir."

Outside, a light rain had started falling and the wind had come up. I rose and shut the window.

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"The next day I kept getting distracted at work. I'd think about her face, her voice. No woman's ever affected me like that. On break I called her and asked her out for the next weekend. She said sure and said she was glad to hear from me. That set up my day. Hell, it set up my *week*. After work I went to the library and looked some things up. I found out about her name. Morgan—if you spell it a little different, it means 'morning' in German. And I dug up some articles about the family. Like, they're rich. Filthy. The house in Hillborne wasn't their only place. There was one in Aspen, too, and one in Vermont. Oh, and an apartment in New York."

"A *pied à terre*."

His brief laugh again. The smile faded. "And then there was her father. Thomas Morgan." He peered into his coffee cup like a fortune teller. "He's one of those guys a hundred years ago you'd call him a tycoon."

"What would you call him now?"

Manko laughed grimly, as if I'd made a clever but cruel joke. He lifted his cup toward me—a toast, it seemed—then continued. "He inherited this company that makes gaskets and nozzles and stuff you'd recognize even if you didn't know what it did. He's about fifty-five and is he *tough*. A big guy, but not fat. A droopy black moustache, and his eyes look you over like he couldn't care less about you but at the same time he's sizing you up, like every fault, every dirty thought you ever had he knows it.

"We caught sight of each other when I dropped Allison off, and I knew, I just somehow *knew* that we were going to go head to head someday. I didn't really think about it then, but deep inside, the thought was there."

"What about her mother?"

"Allison's mom? She's a socialite. She flits around, Allison told me. Man, what a great word. *Flit*. I can picture the old broad, going to bridge games and tea parties. Allison's their only child." His face suddenly grew dark. "That, I figured out later, explains a lot."

"What?" I asked.

"Why her father got on my case in a big way. I'll get to that. Don't rush the Manko man, Frankie."

I smiled in deference.

"Our second date went even better than the first. We saw some movie, I forget what, then I drove her home. Parked in front of her house. Took us an hour to say goodnight, you get what I'm saying?" His voice trailed off. Then he said, "I asked her out for a few days after

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that but she couldn't make it. Ditto the next day and the next, too. I was pissed off at first. Then I got paranoid. Was she trying to, you know, dump me?

"But then she explained it. She was working two shifts whenever she could. I thought, This's pretty funny. I mean, her father's loaded. But, see, there was a *reason*. She's just like me. Independent. She dropped out of college to work in the hospital. She was saving her own money to travel. She didn't want to owe the old man anything. *That's* why she loved listening to me talk, telling her 'bout leaving Kansas when I was seventeen and thumbing around the country and overseas, getting into scrapes. Allison had it in her to do the same thing. Man, that was great. I love having a woman with a mind of her own."

"Do you now?" I asked, but Manko was immune to irony.

"In the back of my mind I was thinking about all the places I'd like to go with her. I'd send her clippings from travel magazines, *National Geographics*. On our first date she'd told me that she loved poetry so I wrote her poems about traveling. It's funny. I never wrote anything before in my life—a few letters maybe, some shit in school—but those poems, man, they just poured out of me. A hundred of 'em. She told me she really liked the ones I wrote about Florida. That's where I went on a vacation with my mom. The only real vacation I ever took with her. When you grow up in Kansas, man, seeing a beach for the first time, it does something to you. It *does* something.

"Well, next thing I knew, bang, we were in love. See, that's the thing about . . . *transcendent* love. It happens right away, or it doesn't happen at all. Two weeks, and we were totally in love. I was ready to propose. I see that look on your face, Frankie boy. Didn't know the Manko man had it in him? What can I say? He's the marryin' kind after all.

"I went to the credit union and borrowed five hundred bucks and bought this diamond ring. Then I asked her out to a movie and a burger after. I played it real cool, you know. I was going to give the ring to the waitress and tell her to put it on a plate and bring it to the table when we asked for dessert. Cute, huh?

"That day I was working the P.M. shift, three to eleven, for the shift bonus, but I ducked out early, at five, and showed up at her house at six-twenty. There were cars all over the place. Allison came outside, looking all nervous. My stomach twisted. Something funny was going on. She told me her mother was having a party and there was a problem. Two maids had got sick or something. Allison had to stay and help her mother. I thought that was weird. *Both* of them getting sick

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at the same time? She said she'd see me in a day or two."

I saw the exact moment the thought came into his mind; his eyes went dead as rocks.

"But there was more to it than that," Manko whispered. "A hell of a lot more."

"Allison's father, you mean?"

But he didn't explain what he meant just then and returned to his story of the aborted proposal. He muttered, "That was one of the worst nights of my life. Here I'd ditched work, I was in hock because of the ring, and I couldn't even get five minutes alone with her. Man, it was torture. I drove around all night. Woke up at dawn, in my car, down by the railroad tracks. And when I got home there was no message from her. Jesus, was I depressed.

"That morning I called her at the hospital. She was sorry about the party. I asked her out that night. She said she really shouldn't, she was so tired—the party'd gone to two in the morning. But how 'bout tomorrow?"

A gleam returned to Manko's eyes. I thought his expression reflected a pleasant memory about their date.

But I was wrong.

His voice was bitter. "Oh, what a lesson we learned. It's a mistake to underestimate your enemy, Frankie. You listen to Manko. Never do it. That's what they taught us in the Corps. *Semper fi.* But Allison and me, we got blindsided.

"The next night I came over to pick her up. I was going to take her to this river bluff, like a lover's lane, you know, to propose. I had my speech down cold. I'd rehearsed all night. I pulled up to the house but she just stood on the porch and waved for me to come up to her. Oh, she was beautiful as ever. I just wanted to hold her. Put my arms around her and hold her forever.

"But she was real distant. She stepped away from me and kept glancing into the house. Her face was pale and her hair was tied back in a ponytail. I didn't like it that way. I'd told her I liked it when she wore it down. So when I saw the ponytail it was like a signal of some kind. An S.O.S.

" 'What is it?' I asked her. She started to cry and said she couldn't see me anymore. 'What?' I whispered. God, I couldn't believe it. You know what it felt like? On Parris Island, basic training, you know? They fire live rounds over your head on the obstacle course. One time I got hit by a ricochet. I had a flak vest on but the slug was a full metal jacket and it knocked me clean on my ass. That's what it was like.

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"I asked her why. She just said she thought it was best and wouldn't go into any details. But then I started to catch on. She kept looking around, and I realized that there was somebody just inside the door, listening. She was scared to death—*that's* what it was. She begged me please not to call her or come by, and I figured out she wasn't talking to *me* so much as saying it for whoever was spying on us. I played along. I said okay, if that's what she wanted, blah, blah, blah . . . Then I pulled her close and told her not to worry. I'd look out for her. I whispered it, like a secret message.

"I went home. I waited as long as I could, then called, hoping that I'd get her alone. I had to talk to her. I had to hear her voice, like I needed air or water. But nobody picked up the phone. They had an answering machine but I didn't leave a message. I didn't get any sleep that weekend—not a single hour. I had a lot to think about. See, I knew what'd happened. I knew exactly.

"Monday morning I got to her hospital at six and waited just outside the entrance. I caught up with her just before she went inside. She was still scared, looking around like somebody was following her, just like on the porch.

"I asked her point blank, 'It's your father, isn't it?' She didn't say anything for a minute then nodded and said that, yeah, he'd forbidden her to see me. Doesn't that sound funny? 'Forbidden.' 'He wants you to marry some preppy, is that it? Somebody from his club?' She said she didn't know about that, only that he'd told her not to see me anymore. The son of a bitch actually threatened her!"

Manko sipped his coffee and pointed a blunt finger at me. "See Frankie, love means zip to somebody like Thomas Morgan. Business, society, image, money—that's what counts to bastards like that. Man, I was so goddamn desperate. . . . It was too much. I threw my arms around her and said, 'Let's get away. Now.'

" 'Please,' she said, 'you have to leave.'

"Then I saw what she'd been looking out for. Her father'd sent one of his security men to spy on her. He saw us and came running. If he touched her I was going to break his neck, I swear I would've. But Allison grabbed my arm and begged me to run. 'He has a gun,' she said.

" 'I don't care,' I told her." Manko laughed. "Not exactly true, Frankie boy, I gotta say. I was scared shitless. But Allison said if I left, the guy wouldn't hurt her. That made sense but I wasn't going just yet. I turned back and held her hard. 'Do you love me? Tell me. I have to know. Say it!'

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"And she did. She whispered, 'I love you.' I could hardly hear it but it was enough for me. I knew everything would be fine. Whatever else, we had each other.

"I got back into the routine of life. Working, playing softball on the plant team—hey, you and me, we threw some balls together, Frankie. I'm a hell of a catcher. You know that."

"I'd never want to be a runner with you guarding home."

"Knock your ass clean back to third base. Am I right?"

He was indeed.

"All the time I kept writing her poetry, sending her articles and letters, you know. I'd put fake return addresses on the envelopes so her father wouldn't guess it was me writing. I even hid letters in Publishers Clearing House envelopes addressed to her! How's that for thinking?

"Once in a while I'd see her in person. I found her in a drugstore by herself and snuck up to her. I bought her a cup of coffee. She was nervous as hell, and I could see why. The goons were outside. We talked for about two minutes is all, then one of 'em saw us, and I had to vanish. I kicked my way out the back door. After that I began to notice these dark cars driving past my apartment or following me down the street. They said MCP on the side. Morgan Chemical Products. They were keeping an eye on me.

"One day this guy came up to me in the hallway of my apartment and said Morgan'd pay me five thousand to leave town. I laughed at him. Then he said if I didn't stay away from Allison there'd be trouble.

"Suddenly I just snapped. I grabbed him and pulled his gun out of his holster and threw it on the floor, then I shoved him against the wall and said, 'You go back and tell Morgan to leave us alone or *he's* the one's gonna be in trouble. You got me?'

"Then I kicked him down the stairs and threw his gun after him. I laughed, but I gotta say I was pretty shook up. I was seeing just how powerful this guy was."

"Money is power," I offered.

"Yeah, you're right there. Money's power. And Thomas Morgan was going to use all of his to keep us apart. You know why? 'Cause I was a threat. Fathers are jealous. Turn on any talk show. Oprah. Sally Jessy. Fathers *hate* their daughters' boyfriends. It's like an Oedipus thing. Especially—what I was saying before—with Allison being an only child. Here I was, a rebel, a drifter, making thirteen bucks an hour. It was like a slap in his face—Allison loving me so completely.

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She was rejecting him and everything he stood for." Manko's face shone with pride for Allison's courage.

Then the smile vanished. "But Morgan was always one step ahead of us. One day I ditched work and snuck into the hospital. I waited for an hour but Allison never showed up. I asked where she was. They told me she wasn't working there anymore. Nobody'd give me a straight answer, but finally I found this young nurse who told me her father'd called and told 'em that Allison was taking a leave of absence. Period. No explanation. She didn't even clean out her locker. Jesus. All her plans to travel, all her plans with me—gone, just like that. I called the house to get a message to her, but he'd changed the number and had it, you know, unlisted. I mean, this guy was in-*credible*.

"And he didn't stop there. Next, he comes after me. I go in to work and the foreman tells me I'm fired. Too many unexcused absences. That was bullshit—I didn't have more than most of the guys. But Morgan must've been a friend of the Kroegers. I was still new, so the union wouldn't go to bat for me. I was out. Just like that.

"Well, I couldn't beat him at his game so I decided to play by my rules." Manko grinned and scooted forward. Our knees touched and I felt all the dark energy that was in him pulse against my skin. "Oh, I wasn't worried for me. But Allison, she's so . . ." As he searched for a word his hands made a curious gesture, as if stretching thread between them, a miniature cat's cradle. He seemed momentarily despairing.

I suggested, "Fragile."

The snap of his fingers startled me. He sat up. "Ex-*actly*. Fragile. She didn't have any defense against her father. I had to do something fast. I went to the police. I wanted 'em to go to the house and see if she was okay. But also it'd be a sign to her father that I wasn't going to take any crap from him." Manko whistled. "Mistake, Frankie. Bad mistake. Morgan was one step ahead of me. This sergeant, some big guy, pushed me into a corner and said if I didn't stay away from Morgan's daughter, the family'd get a restraining order. I'd end up in a cell. Then he looked me over and said something about did I know all sorts of accidents could happen to prisoners. It was a risky place, jail. Man, was I stupid. I should've known the cops'd be on Morgan's payroll too.

"By then I was going crazy. I hadn't seen Allison for days. Jesus, had he sent her off to a convent or something?"

Serenity returned to his face. "Then she gave me a signal. I was hiding in the bushes in a little park across the street, watching the

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house with binoculars. I just wanted to *see* her is all. I wanted to know she was all right. She must've seen me because she lifted the shade all the way up. Oh, man, there she was! The light was behind her and it made her hair glow. Like those things, you know, gurus see."

"Auras."

"Right, right. She was in a nightgown, and I could just see the outline of her body beneath it. She looked like an angel. It was like I was gonna have a heart attack, it was such an incredible thing. There she was, telling me she was all right and she missed me. Somehow, she'd known I was out there. Then the shade went down and she shut the light out.

"I spent the next week planning. I was running out of money. Thanks again to Thomas Morgan. He'd put out the word to all the factories in town, and nobody'd hire me. I added up what I had and it wasn't much. Maybe twelve hundred bucks. I figured it'd get us to Florida. Give me a chance to find work with a printer and Allison could get a job in a hospital."

Then Manko laughed. He studied me critically. "I can be honest with you, Frank. I feel I'm close to you."

So I was no longer Frankie boy. I'd graduated. My pulse quickened and I was deeply, unreasonably moved.

"Fact is, I look tough. Am I right? But I get scared. Real scared. I never saw any action. Grenada, Panama, Desert Storm. I missed 'em all, you know what I'm saying? I was never *tested*. I always wondered what I'd do under fire. Well, this was my chance. I was going to rescue Allison. I was going up against the old man himself.

"I called his company and told his secretary I was a reporter from *Ohio Business* magazine. I wanted to do an interview with Mr. Morgan. She and I tried to find a time he could see me. I couldn't believe it—she bought the whole story. She told me he'd be in Mexico on business from the twentieth through the twenty-second of July. I made an appointment for August 1, then hung up fast. I was worried somebody was tracing the call.

"On the twentieth I staked out the house all day. Sure enough, Morgan left with his suitcase at ten in the morning, and didn't come back that night. There was a security car parked in the driveway, and I figured one of the goons was inside the house. But I'd planned on that. At ten it started to rain. Just like now." He nodded toward the window. "I remember hiding in the bushes, real glad about the overcast. I had about a hundred feet of exposed yard to cover, and the security boys'd spot me for sure in the moonlight. I managed to get to the house

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without anybody seeing me and hide beneath this holly tree while I caught my breath.

"Then it was dues time, Frank. I leaned against the side of the house, listening to the rain and wondering if I'd have the guts to go through with it."

"But you did."

Manko grinned boyishly and did a decent George Raft impersonation. "I broke in through the basement, snuck up to her room, and busted her out of the joint.

"We didn't take a suitcase or anything. We just got out of there fast as we could. Nobody heard us. The security guy was in the living room but he'd fallen asleep watching the *Tonight Show*. Allison and I got into my car and we hit the highway. Man, *Easy Rider*. We were free! On the road, just her and me. We'd escaped.

"I headed for the interstate, driving sixty-two, right on the button, because they don't arrest you if you're doing just seven miles over the limit. It's a state police rule, I heard somewhere. I stayed in the right lane and pointed that old Dodge east southeast. Didn't stop for anything. Ohio, West Virginia, Virginia, North Carolina. Once we started crossing borders, I felt better. Her father was sure to come home from his trip right away and call the local cops, but whether they'd get the highway patrol in, I had my doubts. I mean, he'd have some explaining to do—about how he kept his daughter a prisoner and everything." Manko shook his head. "But you know what I did?"

From the rueful look on his face I could guess. "You underestimated the enemy."

Manko shook his head. "Thomas Morgan," he mused. "I think he must've been a Godfather or something."

"I suppose they have them in Ohio, too."

"He had friends everywhere. Virginia troopers, Carolina, everywhere! Money talks, you know what they say. We were heading south on Twenty-one, making for Charlotte, when I ran into 'em. I went into a 7-Eleven to buy some food and beer and what happens but there's a couple of good ole boys right there, Smoky hats and everything, asking the clerk about a couple on the run from Ohio. I mean, *us*. I managed to get out without them seeing us and we peeled rubber outta there, I'll tell you. We drove for a while, but by then it was almost dawn and I figured we better lay low for the day.

"I pulled into a big forest preserve. We spent the whole day together, lying there, my arms around her, her head on my chest. We just lay in the grass beside the car and I told her stories about places

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we'd travel to. The Philippines, Thailand, California. And I told her what life'd be like in Florida, too."

He looked at me with a grave expression on his taut face. "I could've had her, Frank. You know what I'm saying? Right there. On the grass. The insects buzzing around us. You could hear this river, a waterfall, nearby." Manko's voice fell to a murmur. "But it wouldn't've been right. I wanted everything perfect. I wanted us to be in our own place, in Florida, in our bedroom. That sounds old-fashioned, I know. You think that was stupid of me? You don't think so, do you?"

"No, Manko, it's not stupid at all." Awkwardly I looked for something to add. "It was good of you."

He looked forlorn for a minute, perhaps regretting, stupid or wise, his choosing to keep their relationship chaste.

"Then," he said, smiling devilishly, "things got hairy. At midnight we headed south again. This car passed us then hit the brakes and did a U-ie. Came right after us. Morgan's men. I turned off the highway and headed due east over back roads. Man, what a drive! One-lane bridges, dirt roads. Zipping through small towns. Whoa, Frankie boy, I had four wheels treading air. It was fan-*tastic*. You should've seen it. There must've been twenty cars after us. I managed to lose 'em but I knew we couldn't get very far in that Dodge."

"So you split up?"

He winked. "I knew that part of the state pretty good. Had a couple of buddies in the service from Winston-Salem. We'd go hunting and stayed in this old abandoned lodge near China Grove. Took some doing, but I finally found the place.

"I pulled up outside and made sure it was empty. We sat in the car and I put my arm around her. I pulled her close and told her what I'd decided—that she should stay here. If her father got his hands on her, it'd be all over. He'd send her away for sure. Maybe even brainwash her. Don't laugh. Morgan'd do it. Even his own flesh and blood. She'd stay and I'd lead 'em off for a ways. Then . . ."

"Yes?"

"I waited for him."

"For Morgan? What were you going to do?"

"Have it out with him once and for all. One on one, him and me. Allison begged me not to. She knew how dangerous he was. But I didn't care. I knew he'd never leave us alone. He was the devil. He'd follow us forever if I didn't stop him. She begged me to take her with me but I knew I couldn't. She had to stay. It was so clear to me. See,

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Frank, that's what love is, I think. Not being afraid to make a decision for someone else."

My friend Manko, the rough-hewn philosopher.

"I held her tight and told her not to worry. I told her how there wasn't enough room in my heart for all the love I felt for her. We'd be together again soon."

"Was it safe there, you think?"

"The cabin? Sure. Morgan'd never find it."

"It was in China Grove?"

"Half-hour away. On Badin Lake."

I laughed. "You're kidding me."

"You know it?"

"Sure I do. I've lived all over the state. It must've been in the woods, on the western shore?"

"Yeah, in the woods."

"That's a pretty place."

"It's *damn* pretty. You know, as I drove off I looked back and remember thinking how nice it'd be if that was our house and there Allison'd be in the doorway waiting for me to come home from work."

Manko rose and walked to the window. He gazed through his reflection into the night.

"After I left I drove to a state road. There, for everybody to see. Leadin' off the hounds. Here's Manko. Come and get me. I got twenty miles before they caught up with me. Was a roadblock that did it. I drove the car into this ditch and ran. Then I circled around and hid in a grove of trees. I just waited. About a half-hour later this black limo shows up."

"Morgan?"

"In person. The police had the car out of the ditch by this time and Morgan comes up and looks inside then walks back toward the limo. All this time, I'm just hiding there, waiting. Finally his bodyguards wandered off.

"That's when I made my move. No sneaking up, no cheap shots. I walked out of the trees toward him. He saw me. He looked shocked for a minute, but then he came right at me. I give him credit. He might've called for help. But he didn't, he just ran at me screaming, 'Where's my daughter? Where's my daughter?' I dragged him into the woods, away from his men and the cops, and we went at it. Man, what a slug fest! Him and me, rolling in the dirt, opening skin right and left. See this scar? Was his knuckles did that. I paid him back though, Frankie. That was his day to hurt and hurt bad. Finally I got him down and put

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a choke hold on him. I squeezed and squeezed. I couldn't stop myself. I felt him getting weaker, gasping for breath. I had him. Man, what a feeling!"

Manko touched the window delicately, as if sensing the temperature, then he turned back to me.

"I let him go. I could've finished him. Easy. But I just stood up, left him in the dirt. I laughed at him. A couple of his men came up and grabbed me, but the police pulled them off. Morgan and I just stared at each other. I remember thinking how easy it would've been to kill him. That's what I'd been planning to do, Frank. I suppose you figured that out. Trap him and kill him. But the funny thing is, I didn't need to anymore. I knew we'd won. Allison was safe from him. We'd be together, the two of us. We'd beat Thomas Morgan—tycoon, rich son of a bitch, and father of the most beautiful woman on earth."

Silence fell between us. It was nearly midnight and I'd been here for over three hours. I stretched. Manko paced slowly, his face aglow with anticipation. "You know, Frank, a lot of my life hasn't gone the way I wanted it to. Allison's either. But one thing we've got is our love. That makes everything okay."

"A transcendent love."

A ping sounded and I realized that Manko'd touched his cup to mine once again. We emptied them. He looked out the window into the black night. The rain had stopped, and a faint moon was evident through the clouds. A distant clock started striking twelve.

A solid rap struck the door, which swung open suddenly. I was startled and stood.

Manko turned calmly, the smile still on his face.

"Evening, Tim," said a man of about sixty. He wore a rumpled brown suit. From behind him several sets of eyes peered at me and Manko.

It rankled me slightly to hear the given name. Manko'd always made clear that he preferred his nickname and considered the use of Tim or Timothy an insult. But tonight he didn't even notice; he smiled as he shook the man's gray hand.

There was silence for a moment as another man, wearing a pale blue uniform, stepped into the room with a tray, loaded it up with the dirty dishes.

"Enjoy it, Manko?" he asked.

"Ambrosia," he said, lifting a wry eyebrow toward me.

The older man nodded, then took a blue-backed document from his suit jacket and opened it. There was a long pause. Then in a solemn

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Southern baritone he read, "Timothy Albert Mankowitz, in accordance with sentence pronounced against you pursuant to your conviction for the kidnapping and murder of Allison Kimberly Morgan, I hereby serve upon you this death warrant issued by the Governor of the State of North Carolina, to be effected midnight this day."

The warden handed Manko the paper. He and his lawyer had already seen the faxed version from the court and tonight he merely glanced with boredom at the document. In his face I noted none of the stark befuddlement you almost always see in the faces of condemned prisoners as they read the last correspondence they'll ever receive.

"We got the line open to the Governor, Tim," the warden drawled, "and he's at his desk. I just talked to him. But I don't think . . . I mean, he probably won't make the call."

"I told you all along," Manko said softly, "I didn't even want those appeals."

The execution operations officer, a thin, businesslike man who looked like a feed and grain clerk, cuffed Manko's wrists and instructed him to remove his shoes.

The warden motioned me outside and I stepped into the corridor. Unlike the popular conception of a dismal, Gothic death row, this wing of the prison resembled an overly lit Sunday-school hallway. His head leaned close. "Any luck, Father?"

After a moment I lifted my eyes from the shiny linoleum. "I think so. He told me about a hunting lodge near Badin Lake. Western shore. You know it?"

The warden shook his head. "But we'll have the troopers get some dogs over there. Hope it pans out," he added, whispering. "Lord, I hope that."

So ended my grim task on this grim evening.

Prison chaplains always walk the last hundred feet with the condemned but rarely are they enlisted as a last-ditch means to wheedle information out of the prisoners. I'd consulted my bishop and this mission didn't seem to violate my vows. Still, it was clearly a deceit, and one that would trouble me, I suspected, for a long time. Yet it would trouble me less than the thought of young Allison Morgan lying in an unconsecrated grave, whose location Manko adamantly refused to reveal—his ultimate way, he said, of protecting her from her father.

Allison Kimberly Morgan—stalked relentlessly for months after she dumped Manko following their second date. Kidnapped from her bed then driven through four states with the FBI and a hundred troopers in pursuit. And finally . . . finally, when it was clear that Manko's

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precious plans for a life together in Florida would never happen, knifed to death while—apparently—he held her close and told her how there wasn't enough room in his heart for all the love he felt for her.

Until tonight her parents' only consolation was in knowing that she'd died quickly—her abundant blood in the front seat of his Dodge testified to that. Now there was at least the hope they could give her a proper burial, and in doing so offer her a bit of the love that they may—or may not—have denied her in life.

Manko appeared in the hallway, on his feet the disposable paper slippers the condemned wear to the execution chamber. The warden looked at his watch and motioned down the corridor. "You'll go peaceful, won't you, son?"

Manko laughed. He was the only one in the place with serenity in his eyes.

And why not?

He was about to join his own true love. They'd once again be together.

"You like my story, Frank?"

I told him I did. Then he smiled at me in a curious way, an expression that seemed to contain a hint both of forgiveness and of something I can only call the irrepressible Manko challenge. Perhaps, I reflected, it would not be this evening's deceit that would weigh on me so heavily but rather the simple fact that I would never know whether or not Manko was on to me.

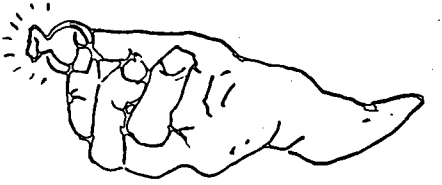
But who could tell? He was, as I've said, a born actor.

The warden looked at me. "Father?"

I shook my head. "I'm afraid Manko's going to forgo absolution," I said. "But he'd like me to read him a few psalms."

"Allison," Manko said earnestly, "loves poetry."

I slipped the Bible from my suit pocket and began to read as we started down the corridor, walking side by side.



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a *NEW* Leopold story by

EDWARD D. HOCH

Captain Leopold's wife Molly has the kind of investigative help her opponents in the courtroom must envy. Since his retirement from the police force, Leopold has served as Molly's best private-eye, entering this time into a deadly dispute between a village's fishermen and bakers. . .

LOAVES AND FISHES

by EDWARD D. HOCH

Leopold's wife Molly had been back practicing criminal law since his retirement from the Violent Crimes Squad, and when she needed an investigator he was happy to oblige. Often it gave him an opportunity to spend some time with Captain Fletcher, Connie Trent, and his other old friends at headquarters.

Fletcher had spruced up the tiny office that had been Leopold's for so many years, and it hardly seemed like the same place. The morning report that Leopold had scanned so faithfully for all those years now came packaged inside a blue plastic folder. "How's Connie doing?" Leopold asked. He'd missed seeing her when he came in.

"Fine. She's on vacation this week."

"Molly wants to have everyone out to the house as soon as it's warm enough to cook outside." The winter had hung on well into April, but finally there were signs of spring—the magnolias and tulips were in bloom, Mother's Day was coming up, and on weekends some of the early boaters could be sighted out on Long Island Sound.

"I'll look forward to getting together," Fletcher said with a smile. "Don't think we've seen you folks socially since Christmas, though Molly cross-examined me in a trial last month."

"I heard about that," Leopold said with a chuckle.

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"She can be a devil in a courtroom."

"I'm working on a case for her now. That's why I stopped in to see you. It's this fisherman thing up in White Cove."

"Out of my jurisdiction, and I'm glad of it. You don't want to get messed up with that."

"I don't have much choice. Rettergine is Molly's client."

"They've got no case against him without a body."

"The prosecutor up there seems to think there's a case. There've been occasional murder convictions without a corpse—a famous case in England decades ago where a ship's steward killed a passenger and shoved the body through a porthole into the ocean. More recently in America there was that woman who disappeared—"

"I know, but it's tough. What are you supposed to do?"

"Find the baker. Rettergine claims he's still alive and in hiding. Could you give me a letter to the White Cove police, identifying me and asking for their help?"

Fletcher shifted in his chair. "I know Chief Hennessey. Spent a lot of time with him at that FBI seminar last year. I'll put in a good word for you."

"Thanks, Fletcher. It's not as if I'm trying to get a killer off. We just want to learn the truth. If we can produce the alleged victim before the trial date it'll save everyone time and money."

"Good luck. And watch yourself. Those fishermen up in White Cove are a rough bunch."

That was not something Fletcher would have said to him ten years ago. Leopold left the office feeling just a bit older than when he'd gone in.

Molly drove up to White Cove with Leopold the following morning. It was only two stops on the train and she planned to leave Leopold with the car while returning home by rail. First, though, she wanted him to meet her client and hear his story.

The jail at White Cove seemed primitive by the standards to which Leopold was accustomed. Chief Hennessey was an overweight, red-faced man of around fifty who greeted him like an old friend. "Captain Fletcher phoned to tell me you'd be coming here. Pleased to meet you."

Leopold shook his hand. "This is my wife, Molly Calendar. She's representing Mr. Rettergine."

"Well, I don't want to give away too many secrets to the defense," he said with a grin, "but I think we've got a pretty strong case even without the body."

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Leopold had read through Molly's notes and the newspaper accounts but he still wanted to learn the facts from the chief. "Suppose you run through it quickly," he suggested.

"Rudy Rettergine, the accused, is a commercial fisherman. Recently a group to which he belongs moved their fish processing operation into a new building about a block from the wharves. Right across the alley are a number of shops including Castleman's Bakery. The merchants were upset that the strong odor of the fish on warm days would keep customers away. They appealed to Felix Castleman to be their spokesman, probably because the smell of baking bread was viewed as the antithesis of the fishy odor. He resisted at first but finally agreed. Castleman attempted to set up a meeting with Rudy Rettergine, whom he'd never met, but was unsuccessful. On the Tuesday in question, a month ago, Castleman arrived at the bakery about three A.M. to start work on Easter bread and cakes for the holiday. His helper didn't arrive until four—"

"The helper's name?" Leopold interrupted to ask.

"Sam Gervase. Fellow in his early twenties who'd worked there about a year. Anyway, Rettergine admits to going to the bakery about three-fifteen that morning for a confrontation with Castleman over the complaints. He admits the two had a violent argument and he told some of the other fishermen that he struck the baker."

"He was the bigger of the two?"

"We don't have any pictures of Castleman except for a fuzzy one in a newspaper ad for the bakery, but it would have been a fair fight. Apparently they were about the same size and weight."

"A fisherman might be more muscular than a baker," Leopold observed.

"Well, yes," Chief Hennessey agreed. "That's exactly the point I made. If they fought and Rettergine hit him, he might have killed him without meaning to. The county prosecutor is charging him with first-degree murder, though."

"Without a corpse?"

The police chief sighed as if he'd heard that question too many times lately. "Captain Leopold, you must—"

"I'm retired, Chief."

"I know, but surely you've had experience with cases like this. The body will turn up sooner or later."

"Then you should release my client now and wait until later to arrest him," Molly said.

"It's out of my hands! The prosecutor—"

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"Let's get back to the scene of the crime," Leopold suggested. "What happened after the confrontation between Rettergine and the baker?"

"He claims to have bloodied Felix Castleman's nose, nothing more than that, and to have left the back room of the bakery around three-thirty. At four A.M. Castleman's assistant, Sam Gervase, arrived to start work. He found the place looking like a murder scene. Blood was splattered everywhere and there was no sign of his employer. He immediately phoned the police. Despite an intensive search of the entire waterfront area there was no sign of Castleman, dead or alive. When we heard Rettergine bragging about the fight, we brought him in for questioning. He downplayed the whole thing, of course, but they decided we had enough to get an indictment."

"Without a corpse?"

Chief Hennessey unwrapped a stick of chewing gum and Leopold wondered if he was trying to quit smoking. "You must know that the term *corpus delicti* refers to the body of the crime, not the corpse itself. All we need in this state is proof of criminal violence adequate to produce death, exerted in such a manner as to account for the disappearance of the body. The blood certainly shows criminal violence, and Rettergine has admitted the two men fought. The scene of the crime is close enough to Long Island Sound to account for the missing body."

Molly gave an unaccustomed snort. "You believe my client carried the bloody body two blocks to the water without being seen?"

"He's a muscular man, remember, and it was the middle of the night."

"Could we see him now?"

"Sure." He took out a ledger and checked the wall clock for the time, carefully noting it on the proper line. "You both have to sign the book."

The chief led the way, with Molly following and Leopold bringing up the rear. The jail itself was little more than a half-dozen holding cells of the sort one might find in a big-city precinct station. Only one cell was occupied and Chief Hennessey pulled up two wooden chairs in front of it. "You'll have to talk to him from out here," he said. "We've got no interview room and there's no room for you both in his cell."

Molly sat down and unclasped her attaché case, taking a folder from it. Leopold occupied the other chair, sitting back a bit from Molly. It was her show. The man who faced them through the bars

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was deeply tanned, with a withered, rusty face that went well with his red hair. He wore gray jail garb with the county name stenciled across the front of his shirt. Leopold guessed him to be in his early forties.

"Hello again, Mr. Rettergine," Molly said, reaching through the bars to shake hands. "This is Mr. Leopold, the investigator I said would be working on your case."

Leopold shook hands too, feeling the strength of the man's grip. "I thought you'd have me outta here by now," Rettergine said, sitting on the edge of his bunk as he spoke.

"It's not as easy as I thought it would be. The district attorney is stubbornly insisting he has enough evidence for an indictment. That's why I brought Mr. Leopold in. If Felix Castleman is alive, we'll find him. Right now that's your best defense—find the victim alive and you're off the hook."

"He's alive," the suntanned fisherman insisted.

"I just have a couple of questions," Leopold said, taking over from Molly. "Rudy, you say you never actually met Felix Castleman before that confrontation at his bakery. How did you know it was him?"

"I asked him. I pounded on the back door and when he came I said, 'You Castleman?' and he said he was."

"Had you been drinking?"

"I'd just gotten up. I was on my way to the boat."

"Had you been drinking?" Leopold repeated.

"Sometimes I have a Bloody Mary for breakfast. Just one."

"Are you married?"

"I live with a woman. We're engaged."

Leopold slipped the notebook from his jacket pocket. "What's her name and address?"

"Iona Ramsey. Same address as mine."

"I'll want to speak with her."

"Sure, go ahead. She knows less about Castleman than I do."

"Can you repeat the conversation you had with him on the morning of his disappearance?"

"I asked him about these local merchants complaining about the smell of fish. He told me he was busy baking bread and to come back around noon. I said I'd be out on my boat then. I just wanted ten minutes to talk about the problem. He said to get out and pushed me in the chest with his hand. I guess I slapped him then."

"Slapped him?"

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"Yeah. Then he hit me and I punched him back. His nose started bleeding. That's when I left, before things got any worse."

"Where'd you go?"

"To the boat. I told my mate what happened and said to go out without me that day."

"You told him you struck Castleman?"

"Yeah, well, I probably made it sound like more of a fight than it really was. You know how it is."

Leopold made another note. "Were there any other fishermen upset about this thing?"

"We were all upset. To us, fish smell just as sweet as baking bread. They're our livelihood."

"Was anyone upset enough to go there after you left Castleman and finish the job?"

"I don't know. Maybe."

"All right," he told the man behind the bars. "I'll probably want to see you again after I've looked around."

Rettergine sighed. "It doesn't look like I'm goin' anyplace."

Molly and Leopold left soon afterward. He dropped her at the station. "Call me tonight if you find anything," she suggested.

"I'll call you anyway." He kissed her goodbye and watched her get on the train. Then he went back to the car and drove toward the wharves.

Rudy Rettergine's fishing boat was named the *Trolling Moon,* perhaps from the fact that fishermen often set out by moonlight to reach the fishing grounds by dawn. It was a good-sized vessel, with a large trolling net ready to be lowered at the stern. Leopold walked across the gangplank and was met by a crewman in striped T-shirt and jeans. He asked for the first mate and the crewman directed him up to the bridge. The mate's name was Abe Nichols, a big-bearded man who looked more like a lumberjack than a fisherman.

"I'm working with Molly Calendar," Leopold told him. "She's defending Rudy Rettergine."

"Yeah." Nichols put on a pair of reading glasses that had the immediate effect of softening the weathered lines of his face. "Is she any good? Can she get him off?"

"She's good, and the odds are that he'll get off. It would just be a lot easier if we could locate Castleman. That's my job. I understand Rudy came back here after the fight and told you about it."

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"That's right. I guess they had a disagreement about the location of our new processing plant. The activists were trying to arrange a debate between Rudy and Castleman, and he wanted none of it. He went over to try settling the thing and that's when the fight developed."

"Exactly what did he say to you that morning?"

"Said he'd bloodied Castleman's nose, knocked him down. 'Maybe he won't be smelling so good for a while.' " He imitated Rudy's voice.

"Did you take the boat out then?"

"I did, with the rest of the crew. Rudy doesn't really go with us all that much. Maybe once every week or ten days. He's our indoor man now, with the new plant and all."

"Do you know anyone who might have seen Castleman alive after the fight?"

"No. By the time we got back into the dock that afternoon I heard that Rudy had been arrested. He's being held on two hundred thousand dollars bail and that's too much for him to raise."

"This boat must be worth that much with all its equipment."

"He's in hock to the bank for most of it. If the grand jury indicts him and it goes to trial he could be in jail for months."

"Have you been to see him?" Leopold asked.

"Yeah. He's a confident guy. He's sure he'll get off. They can't convict him without a body, can they?"

"It's rare," Leopold said, "but it's been known to happen. Do you know anything about Castleman's friends or relatives, anyone who might be hiding him?"

"Not a thing. I been in his bakery a couple of times, but I didn't really know him. He kept pretty much to himself. That's why we were all surprised when this neighborhood council picked him to lead the fight against our new processing plant."

"What about this woman of Rudy's—Iona?"

"Iona Ramsey. They been together about five years. They'll probably get married someday."

"Where can I find her?"

"She gets off work about now. Usually she stops by on her way to see Rudy in case I got any messages for him. Stick around and maybe you'll see her."

"Where's she work?"

"Day-care center near here. That's her car now."

Leopold watched a blue subcompact pull up to the wharf. A woman in dark slacks and a gray sweater got out and waved up at them.

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She came aboard quickly, easily negotiating the slight rolling of the vessel as she crossed the gangplank. Nichols went out and greeted her at the top of the stairs.

"There's a fellow here asking about you, Iona. I told him you'd be along."

Leopold had the distinct impression his words were in the nature of a warning. He introduced himself to the woman. "I'm working with Molly Calendar, Rudy's attorney. Perhaps he mentioned it to you."

"He did. She's supposed to be good at criminal law. How can I help you, Mr. Leopold?"

She was very sure of herself, probably close to Rudy's age, and obviously not bothered by the odor of the fish. "Do you know the missing baker?" he asked.

"Castleman? I don't think we ever met. I buy my bread at the supermarket."

"Then you haven't seen him since he disappeared?"

"If I'd seen him, I'd be shouting it from the rooftops. The bastard is hiding somewhere just to keep Rudy behind bars! I think Mrs. O'Shea knows it, too!"

"Who's Mrs. O'Shea?"

"Carol O'Shea. She's the president of this neighborhood group that got Castleman to front for them. They want Rudy in prison and the rest of the fishermen banished up the coast somewhere."

"I'll speak with her," Leopold promised.

"You going to see Rudy?" Abe Nichols asked the woman.

"Right after I leave here. Any messages?"

"Tell him we had a good haul of red snappers this morning. There should be enough to fill all our orders."

"He'll be glad to hear there's some money coming in. His legal expenses will go through the roof if he has to go to trial."

"We're trying to prevent that," Leopold said.

When Iona Ramsey departed a few moments later he left too, walking across the gangplank and down the wharf to the parking area. "Is his lawyer having any luck so far?" she asked.

"We're following a couple of leads," Leopold answered vaguely. "What do you think happened?"

"I can't imagine Rudy ever killing anyone. I live with the guy, for God's sake, and he's a pussycat." She glanced sideways at him. "He'd love you to death but he wouldn't ever harm you."

"It might have happened accidentally in a fight."

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"Then what'd he do with the body? Bake it inside a big loaf of bread?"

"That would be more Castleman's way," Leopold said with a chuckle.

"They should have switched jobs for a day. Rudy could have baked the bread and we'd see how Castleman handled all those smelly fish." She unlocked her car and slid behind the wheel. "Keep us informed," she told him.

Leopold nodded. "I want to look at the bakery tomorrow, and I'll probably talk to Rudy again."

She drove away and he headed for the motel where he'd reserved a room for the night. After dinner he phoned Molly and learned that Chief Hennessey had been checking up on him. "I guess he phoned Fletcher. He wanted to know what our connection was."

"Is it that obvious?" Leopold asked, smiling at the telephone.

"Have you learned anything?"

"Lots of things. Nothing fits together yet, though. I'll phone you tomorrow."

"Sleep well. I love you."

She'd given him a set of photographs of the alleged crime scene, and after the phone call he spread them out on the bed. It seemed odd studying these photos of a place he hadn't yet visited, seeing spots of blood on the floor and wall, even on a tray of freshly baked bread, without any body at the center of the scene. There did appear to be a great deal of blood from a mere nosebleed, but none of the pooling he was used to seeing at particularly brutal killings. He'd thought of some more questions to ask Chief Hennessey and also Rudy Rettergine when he visited the jail the following day.

Reading the morning paper over breakfast, he found an item about the dangers of various common foods that even suggested the odor of baking bread could be harmful. He wondered if Abe Nichols and the other fishermen had seen it.

Stopping first at the bakery, he found a somewhat harried young man trying to wait on customers while he moved trays of baked goods from the back room to the display cases. Leopold waited till things quieted down before he approached him.

The sandy-haired young man, probably still in his twenties, recovered his composure and asked, "What'll it be, sir?"

Leopold smiled. "Are things always this hectic?"

"My girl's late this morning so I'm doing double-duty."

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"You're Sam Gervase?"

"That's right."

Leopold passed him his card. "I'm working for the attorney defending Mr. Rettergine, trying to find out what really happened here."

"My boss was killed, that's what happened." He pushed his rimless glasses a bit higher on his nose.

"Do you have time to show me the back room?"

"I guess so," he agreed grudgingly. "You won't find anything, though. As soon as the cops would let me, I scrubbed the whole room down." He led the way through a swinging door.

"You're continuing the business, are you?"

"Until Mr. Castleman returns or his family tells me otherwise."

"What about his family?" Leopold asked, glancing around at the room he knew from the police photographs. There were large ovens, trays of baked goods, piles of kneaded dough. The place was very warm and he was sorry he'd worn his raincoat.

"That's a tough one. He was unmarried and lived alone in a little one-room apartment on Davis Avenue. I've worked for him since he opened this place a year ago and the only family he ever mentioned was a sister down in Delaware. He was often away, and I suppose he might have been visiting her. The police are trying to locate her."

A bell chimed, indicating a customer had entered the shop. Gervase excused himself and Leopold took the opportunity to poke around the place. He opened one of the big ovens and peered inside. Large enough for a body, certainly, but he was pretty sure Castleman hadn't ended up in there. The heat of bakery ovens wasn't nearly enough to incinerate a body without a trace.

The open shelves along one side of the room had closed cabinets beneath them. Most were filled with supplies, but one on the end was locked. It was a simple matter for him to spring the bolt with a swipe of his credit card, keeping an ear cocked for Gervase's return. He didn't know what he expected to find, but the cabinet held only a dozen loaves of unsliced bread, each in a clear plastic bag. It felt hard and probably stale. He closed the cabinet door quickly as the young man returned.

"Was there anything else, Mr. Leopold? I really have a great deal of work to do."

"Just one more question. What was Mr. Castleman's attitude toward the fishermen and their processing plant?"

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"I never heard him mention it until the committee got after him to go up against Rettergine. That upset him. He wasn't one for meetings and bargaining. Besides, he usually worked through the early morning hours and then went home. The girls and I handled the store itself. He had a few special customers he waited on personally, but we took care of most of it."

"Thank you," Leopold told him. "I believe that's all."

"If that fisherman killed him, I hope he rots in prison. You shouldn't be helping him to get out."

"I'm only trying to find the truth, to find your boss if he's still findable."

Leopold left the bakery and drove over to police headquarters and the jail. The weather was warming up and he left his raincoat in the car. Inside, Chief Hennessey didn't seem surprised to see him again. "How's the investigation coming?" he asked. "You found Castleman yet?"

"I'm still looking."

The chief chuckled. "He's probably at the bottom of the Sound with an anchor tied to his feet. You want to see the prisoner?"

"For just a few minutes."

Leopold sat on the same wooden chair facing the bars of Rettergine's cell. "How are you today? They treating you well?"

"Sure. I'd rather be out, though. Can't she get my bail reduced?"

"I'm sure Ms. Calendar is trying everything she can."

Rudy Rettergine grinned. "The chief tells me she's your wife."

"Yes, she is."

"A guy your age must feel great having something like that waiting for him every night."

Leopold felt anger boil inside him at the prisoner's words. He wanted to walk away and go back home and let Rettergine rot in his cell. Only the fact that this was Molly's client kept him sitting there. "I think we'd better stick to the Castleman matter. Exactly what time was it when you visited him that morning?"

"How many times have I been over this? It was around three-fifteen. I phoned Castleman the night before and arranged for the meeting. He told me he didn't start work till three so I should come after that."

"You phoned him," Leopold repeated. He hadn't heard that before. "Where'd you phone him?"

"At his apartment. I'd have gone over there but he was just goin' to bed. Eight o'clock—can you imagine? Even I don't turn in that early."

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"It was the week before Easter," Leopold said, half to himself. "He had to go in earlier than usual." He remembered the tray of bread in the police photographs, and the locked cabinet full of stale loaves.

"We had our words, traded a few blows. He was alive when I left, wiping his bloody nose with a handkerchief."

"How about you? Did you bleed at all?"

"Cut my hand a bit, that was all." He held up his tanned arm, but there was nothing to be seen.

Leopold stood up. "I think that's all the questions for now."

"Tell your wife to get me out of here! I'm paying her good money and I want results."

"I'll tell her."

He went back to the chief's office. Hennessey was dictating a letter to his secretary and when he'd finished he turned to Leopold. "That was quick."

"I heard all I needed from him. Tell me about the investigation of the crime scene. I want to know about the blood. Apparently the accused bled a bit, too."

"Yeah, he had a cut on his hand when we arrested him. Nothing major. It might have bled a little."

"So there was blood from both men in the room."

"That's right. We obtained a court order to take a sample of Rettergine's blood for comparison purposes. Of course, without a body we couldn't verify Castleman's blood. Rettergine is type B and we assume the type A samples belonged to the missing man."

"I'd like to see Castleman's apartment."

"Nothing there, take my word for it. A bed, some spare furniture—the man lived like a monk."

"Still, there might be a clue to his whereabouts."

"He's with the fishes, Leopold. Believe me."

But Hennessey was on his way out to lunch and agreed to swing by the missing man's address. It was a furnished room on Davis Avenue, in one of those big old houses that had been cut up into apartments a few decades back. A superintendent lived on the premises and the chief assured him it was all right to show Leopold the place. "Don't leave him alone there, though," the chief said in his half-kidding manner. "He might steal the silverware."

Hennessey drove off to lunch and Leopold followed the super up the front stairs. He was a balding man in his sixties named Ralph. Another of the retired warhorses, Leopold decided. "Were you ever a cop?"

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Ralph turned to stare at him. "Fireman. Why'd you ask?"

"I was a cop. Sometimes we can spot each other. Tell me a little about Felix Castleman."

"Not much to tell," Ralph answered, unlocking a door in the second-floor hallway. "I hardly ever saw him. Of course he probably used the back stairs and he'd be at work before I woke up in the morning. But he paid his rent on time and didn't make any noise."

Leopold glanced around the room. A faded sofa and chairs, a dinette set and kitchenette, a tiny bathroom. "Where's the bed?"

"The sofa opens up. It was meant to be a student apartment. I was surprised when he took it. Said he was just divorced and couldn't afford much. Put all his money in the bakery."

"Where'd he come from?"

"Maryland, Delaware—one of those places."

There was a little clock radio next to the sofa and Leopold pressed the alarm button. The digital display jumped from the current time to 8:00 A.M. He grunted and moved over to the refrigerator. It contained only a few bottles of beer. "Was there anything else in here?" His gaze moved to the telephone on the dinette table.

"Not much," Ralph answered. "I cleaned out some spoiled things after he'd been missing for a week."

Leopold decided the police chief had been kidding about stealing the silverware. There wasn't any that he could find. He counted four glasses and a couple of plates, along with a single knife and fork. "He didn't spend much time here," Leopold observed.

He left the apartment a short while later. He'd followed Hennessey over in his car and now he drove to the insurance office where Carol O'Shea worked. She was a handsome woman in her forties with a strong concern for environmental issues. "Yes, I asked Felix Castleman to be our spokesman in opposing the fishermen," she told him. "He was a quiet man without much of a life. I thought it would be good for him and us both. I wanted a public debate on the issue."

"Did he go out at all, have any girlfriends or male friends?"

"Not that I ever saw. He was a bit vain, though." She smiled at the memory. "I think that thick blond hair of his was a wig."

Leopold tried to find a picture of Castleman in the back newspapers at the library, but they'd used only a blow-up of that fuzzy advertising photo. He phoned Molly again around dinnertime. "I'm making some progress," he told her. "Castleman might be in hiding, but I don't know from what. He can't be afraid of Rudy, sitting in a jail cell."

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"Think you can smoke him out?"

"I'll try."

"Have you been to see Rudy again?"

"I stopped by this morning. He's not someone I especially like. Why don't you let him rot in jail?"

She laughed, thinking he was joking. "Because he's paying me to get him out. It's my job."

"I know," he agreed with a sigh. "I'll call you tomorrow. I want to try something tonight."

"What's that?" she asked.

"Something I could never do in the old days—a bit of burglary."

After dark Leopold left the motel and walked the few short blocks to Castleman's bakery. The back door had a simple lock that he opened without difficulty. Crossing the darkened room, he went immediately to the locked cabinet he'd examined earlier. The dozen loaves of stale bread were still inside. He unwrapped one of them and broke it apart near the middle of the loaf. A slender bag of white powder was inside. It took him only an instant's taste of the substance on the tip of his finger to establish that it was cocaine. He broke open a second loaf and then a third. All had bags of cocaine inside.

Leopold found an empty plastic trash bag and dumped the dozen loaves with their contents into the bag. He closed the cabinet and went out the back door of the bakery. He hadn't moved three feet from the door when a spotlight hit him and two men with guns came running up.

"Police! Freeze!" one shouted. Both men wore jeans and sneakers and blue nylon jackets stenciled with the word POLICE. Leopold sighed and dropped the bag.

"I don't suppose it would do any good to tell you who I am."

"We know who you are, mister! You're the guy who finally came after his cocaine. We've been waiting a month for someone to pick it up."

Leopold had never spent a night in a cell before, and it was not a pleasant experience. He was across the corridor from Rudy Rettergine and he really had nothing to say to the man. He pretended to sleep on the hard bunk until he was roused before eight A.M. by Chief Hennessey himself. "Come on, Leopold. You're outta here."

Molly was waiting in the chief's office and she had Fletcher with her. They'd been up before dawn to drive to White Cove and Fletcher

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was barely controlling his anger. "I'm sorry about this," he told Leopold.

Chief Hennessey looked a bit sheepish. "I wasn't on duty last night," he apologized. "The narcotics squad should have called me and they didn't. It was just a mix-up."

"I asked you to extend him every courtesy, Bill," Fletcher said, sounding disappointed.

"I feel terrible about it! I told you that. You have to remember, though, that if he found narcotics at the bakery he should have notified us."

"You already knew about it," Leopold pointed out. He felt the need of a hot shower and breakfast, but guessed they'd have to wait. He had other business first.

Captain Fletcher glanced at his watch. "It's an hour's drive back, Molly. I really should get going."

She turned to him with a smile. "I really don't know what we'd do without you."

Leopold chuckled. "I know what I'd be doing—spending two nights in a cell instead of one!"

"No, no," Chief Hennessey insisted. "I'd have straightened it out as soon as I arrived."

Leopold shook hands with Fletcher. "Thanks for coming anyway. Molly and I will wrap things up here."

When he'd gone, Chief Hennessey shifted awkwardly in his chair. "Do you want to see your client while you're here?" he asked Molly.

Leopold answered for her. "I think we both want to see him. Perhaps you'll want to get the county prosecutor over here too, Chief. He'll have to dismiss the charges pending against Rettergine."

"Dismiss?"

Molly shot him a look of surprise. "You mean you know what happened to Castleman?"

"I do."

The chief thought about that. "I think I'd better hear it first before I call the prosecutor."

"Then bring Rettergine in here where we have room to talk."

"He'll have to be handcuffed," Hennessey told him. "I'll give you ten minutes alone with him first."

Minutes later the prisoner was brought in, handcuffed to a stout leather belt around his waist. "Have a good night's sleep?" he asked Leopold, slouching down awkwardly on a leather couch.

"I survived."

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"Let's get right to it," Molly said "Who killed Felix Castleman?"

"No one," Leopold said, keeping his eyes on her face.

"Then where's he hiding, and why?"

"The *why* is easy. The narcotics squad was about to arrest him, so he decided to disappear."

"You have some proof that Rettergine didn't kill him?"

"Proving that's not hard at all. You see, Rettergine couldn't have killed Castleman in the back room of the bakery or anywhere else, because Rettergine and Castleman are the same person."

Molly gasped at his words and Rettergine seemed to tense up. "Where'd you get that crazy idea?" he asked.

"There were about a half-dozen clues along the way, but the first was when we met the other day. I noticed you had an amazing suntan for someone who'd been in a jail cell for nearly a month. The mate on your fishing boat told me you only went out with them every week or ten days. I decided you didn't have a real tan at all, that you were using one of those skin products to produce a fake tan. I asked myself why, and wondered if it was some sort of subtle disguise. Then I got to thinking about you and the missing victim. The chief here told me you two were about the same size and weight, and your girl Iona mentioned your baking and even said you and Castleman should have switched jobs for a day. I remembered that you'd never met until the morning you supposedly killed him."

"How could I have worked in two places at once?" Rudy asked.

"You didn't go out fishing often, and Castleman worked early in the morning and then usually left for the day. He was often away. There was more evidence in the one-room apartment where he supposedly lived. The place was practically empty, with few necessities. The clock radio's alarm was set at eight A.M., hardly the time a baker would rise. In fact you told me yourself you phoned the apartment the night before the confrontation and arranged to meet Castleman at the bakery after three. Unless he had a second alarm clock, that had to be a lie. Castleman didn't stay at the apartment much, if ever. Mrs. O'Shea told me she thought Castleman wore a wig, and I knew your sun tan was faked."

"Why?" Molly asked. "What was the point of the dual identity?"

"The drugs were the answer. As Castleman he was putting packets of cocaine into the loaves of bread and selling them to special customers. Gervase told me he had some customers he waited on personally. Where did the cocaine come from? When I was on Rudy's

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boat his mate Abe told Iona to let him know they'd had a good catch of red snappers. I don't know much about fish but I know red snappers come from the Gulf of Mexico, not Long Island Sound. I think Abe was sending word that something else had arrived from the Gulf area—packages of cocaine attached to light buoys or containing homing beepers so the boat could pick them out of the water before dawn. I wondered why Castleman would leave a dozen loaves of cocaine-filled bread in that cabinet for so long. He couldn't come back for it because he was in jail accused of his own murder."

"What about the blood?" Molly asked.

"I think Rudy knew the narcotics people were watching the bakery, ready to move in. Then Carol O'Shea asked Castleman to lead the fight over the fish processing plant and even take part in a debate with Rudy. That forced his hand. He had to get rid of Castleman and blur the trail back to himself. The crime scene at the bakery didn't ring true to me. For one thing, the photos showed splattered blood on a tray of bread. Castleman wouldn't have had time to bake fresh bread in the fifteen minutes before Rudy arrived. If that much was faked, the whole thing could have been faked. Some of the blood was Rudy's. I suspect the rest belonged to Abe Nichols or someone else on the fishing boat. Nichols talked about the fight at the bakery because Rudy wanted him to. He figured they'd suspect him of killing Castleman, but he knew he wouldn't be convicted without a body. What better way to prove they were two different people?"

Molly Calendar stared at her client. "Rudy, is this true?"

The tanned fisherman looked at her and then at Leopold. "Close enough," he said finally. "I didn't know some nutty prosecutor would lock me up for a month. I couldn't get back to those loaves of bread and we couldn't risk sending Abe for them."

"Why couldn't Castleman just disappear, without the faked murder?"

"Because somebody like Mrs. O'Shea or Sam Gervase might see me one day and recognize Castleman. This way our names were linked in everyone's mind. No one would suspect we could be the same person."

"Chief Hennessey should be told about this," Molly said.

"Go ahead," Rudy agreed reluctantly.

Leopold stood up and stretched. His back was still aching from those hours on the bunk. "I guess we're finished here, Molly."

"I'll take the train home later," she told him. "Mr. Rettergine still needs a lawyer. Only the charges are different now." ○

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THE JURY BOX
by JON L. BREEN

Writers of popular fiction find paperback original publication has both advantages (quicker money, more copies before the public) and disadvantages (less review attention and prestige, less permanence in library collections). At one time, only certain types of mysteries, first tough and sexy fiction noir and later spy series and modern gothics, were likely to appear first in paperback, and mystery series that moved from paperback original to hardcover publication were relatively rare, Ed McBain's 87th Precinct and John D. MacDonald's Travis McGee being the most prominent early examples. Today all sorts of mystery series are likely to be in paperback first, and moves to the hardcover lists happen much more frequently. Here are the latest titles from some authors and series that began in paperback and now have moved to hardback, plus a strong American novel that began life as a British paperback and a couple of recent softcover originals.

*** Richard A. Lupoff: *The Bessie Blue Killer,* St. Martin's, $20.95. The first novel about insurance investigator Hobart Lindsey and Berkeley cop Marvia Plum was *The Comic Book Killer* (1988), not technically a paperback original since Offspring Press produced a limited edition hardback (complete with full-color comic book!) prior to Bantam's mass market edition. As far as I can determine, *The Classic Car Killer* (1992) was only published in paperback. The first general trade hardcover in the series continues the preoccupation with collectibles, in this case vintage-World War II aircraft, and with odd corners of twentieth-century American history and culture, including sidelights on jazz musicians and the Negro baseball leagues. Lindsey and Plum are well-drawn, likeable characters, and their case is an exciting blend of enthusiastically conveyed information and a cleverly wrought crime puzzle. An author's note carefully separates fact from fiction and provides a bibliography of further reading.

*** Richard A. Lupoff: *The Sepia Siren Killer,* St. Martin's, $20.95. The second Lindsey and Plum case of the year is, objectively speaking, probably not quite as good as its predecessor: for one thing, the somewhat predictable main twist repeats a well-worn plot gimmick used (albeit differently) in the previous title. But to anyone who, like me, is fascinated both with the history of the motion picture industry and with African-American contributions to American culture, it must be highly recommended. Pioneering black filmmaker Edward J. "Speedy" MacReedy is an especially interesting and well-realized character whose memories have the ring of truth. I hope Lupoff adds many more

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volumes to this captivating series.

*** William L. DeAndrea: *The Manx Murders,* Penzler, $20. Prof. Niccolo Benedetti, a somewhat Wolfean supersleuth who calls himself philosopher rather than detective, has had an interesting career in print. Though his first appearance, *The HOG Murders* (Avon, 1979), was a deserving Edgar Winner, it took thirteen years for the second book in the series, *The Werewolf Murders,* to appear, this time in hardcover. The third poses a Queenian situation—twin brothers and business partners who live in twin houses and don't speak to each other—and builds such a satisfyingly intricate formal puzzle of kidnapping and murder that few readers will mind that the killer is easily spottable.

*** Linda Grant: *A Woman's Place,* Scribners, $20. In a novel that takes a somewhat different slant on workplace sexual harassment from Michael Crichton's bestselling *Disclosure,* San Francisco private eye Catherine Sayler goes undercover to find out who is playing anonymous pranks on the female employees of a computer firm. (Her instructions: it's okay to nail a salesman, but the programmers are too valuable to lose.) Activities escalate from rude e-mail messages to pornographic photos to snuff photos to office murder. The problem at hand and the harrowing picture of the plight of women in the business world combine to keep you turning the pages. The first Sayler novel, *Random Access Murder* (Avon, 1988), is now reputedly a collector's item.

*** Robert J. Randisi, *Stand-Up,* Walker, $19.95. Manhattan boxer-turned-private eye Miles Jacoby, who first appeared in *Eye in the Ring* (Avon, 1982), has always been one of the most modest and likable of his breed. His fifth book-length appearance, probably the best to date, involves him in two cases, the more interesting brought his way by a stand-up comic of dubious talent who wants to know who stole the joke file out of his computer. The low-key approach and self-effacing humor that characterize the author are here, along with a briskness of pace, complexity of plot, and taut buildup of dramatic scenes that puts the novel ahead of its predecessors.

*** Maxine O'Callaghan: *Trade-Off,* St. Martin's, $19.95. Private eye Delilah West is a pioneer in more ways than one, not only arguably the first of the new-style female sleuths-for-hire (if you count short story appearances) but also one of the first to realize the possibilities of Orange County, California, as a crime fiction locale. Her first book-length case was *Death is Forever* (Raven House, 1980). This one, her fifth (and third in hardcover), involves her acceptance of a relatively routine assignment to find a runaway teenager, followed by the discovery of a murdered woman on the grounds of the house next door. West, paradoxically both one of the toughest and most romantically preoccupied of the female P.I.'s, is in characteristically good form.

*** Joe L. Hensley: *Grim City,* St. Martin's, $19.95. Hensley, a retired Indiana judge whose first mystery *The Color of Hate* (1960) was an Ace paperback original, makes a wel-

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come comeback after four years. The background of midwestern small-city justice and politics is familiar to Hensley's fans but the central character is a new one: Latino Kentucky lawyer James Carlos Singer, a sight-impaired former spook looking for the killer of his father while serving as probation officer and observing an accused wife-murderer's trial at the request of the presiding judge. Enthralling in court and out, this is one of Hensley's best.

*** Ed Gorman: *Shadow Games,* CD Publications, P.O. Box 18433, Baltimore, MD 21237; $35. This powerful novel was nominated for a Shamus Award on the basis of its appearance in 1993 as a British paperback. Its first American edition, limited to 400 signed and numbered hardcover copies, makes one wonder why such a suspenseful and compelling work wasn't snapped up readily by a major U.S. publisher. Charting the career of child actor Cobey Daniels from TV stardom to shopping-mall sex scandal to psychiatric institutionalization to murder-plagued young adulthood, Gorman makes some pointed observations about the way Hollywood exploits its young performers. The novel is dedicated to actor Bobby Driscoll (1937-1968), who was the author's cousin.

*** Jeff Abbott: *Do Unto Others,* Ballantine, $4.99. In the first of a projected small-town mystery series, Jordan Poteet, who has left an editing job in the north and returned to Mirabeau, Texas, to become town librarian and help care for his Alzheimer's-afflicted mother, becomes chief suspect in the murder of determined library censor Beta Harcher, found beaten to death with a baseball bat in Poteet's office. The main clue the victim leaves behind is a list of local residents identified with Bible quotations. Abbott's debut has both light and dark tones, is thoroughly readable, and presents a well-drawn gallery of suspects.

** Melissa Cleary: *First Pedigree Murder,* Berkley, $4.50. The fifth in the series about college film teacher Jackie Walsh and her ex-police dog companion Jake concerns murder during an interview on the campus radio station. This book has unusual attractions—it's padded with extraneous material (a broadcast tribute to Jack Benny and Fred Allen that gathers some of their best lines and an editor's analysis of the Zapruder film) that many readers will find more diverting than the mystery plot, and the most interesting whodunit is the identity of the author. The publisher's ownership of the copyright suggests a packaged series, with Cleary either a pseudonym or a house name. The author, seemingly not much interested in doing a dog mystery, makes Jake's role rather perfunctory. I suspect a male author well-known under at least one other name, possessor of considerable knowledge of film, old radio, and literature, and a fan of Michael Avallone's Ed Noon. (I don't think it's Avallone himself, though.)

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DETECTIVERSE

LAST FERRY

by KATHERINE H. BROOKS

He watched her lean against the rail,
  her knees across the seat,
And felt consumed with sadness
  that she'd learned to lie and cheat,
But, since he'd never trust again
  her false, denying pout,
Reluctantly he paid the man
  he'd hired to rub her out.
"Get rid of her," he gruffly said,
  "the moment she's alone."
The deed was done. She toppled off,
  submerging like a stone.
He ran to watch the ripples frame
  her dear, unfaithful head,
And, as a gesture of respect
  for one so nearly dead,
He tossed a posy, purchased while
  reflecting on their troubles.
It bobbed and bounced above her hair,
  and vanished in the bubbles.
The man who'd pushed her disappeared,
  his pocket somewhat richer.
Our hero found a truer love,
  and burned the other's picture.
The victim's gone—but rumor goes
  that somewhere, underneath,
A dogfish swims, with glasses
  and a tulip in its teeth.

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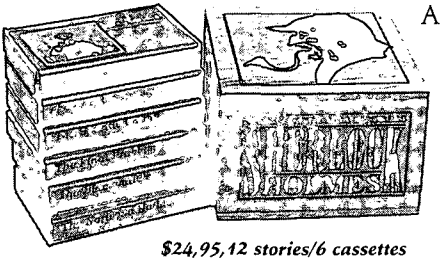

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a *NEW* short story by

JANWILLEM VAN DE WETERING

Several of Janwillem van de Wetering's previous stories for us featured the three Dutch police detectives he used in his early novels. Recently the author has been developing two mystery series set in the United States (his adopted home). The following story kicks off for EQMM *the adventures of Jannie, a Florida Keys recluse who's as wily and savvy as they come. . . .*

KIMONO AND SKULL

by JANWILLEM VAN DE WETERING

We're at Shark Key, a tiny, deserted, less than an acre mangrove and coral islet situated between Florida and Cuba, some twenty miles out of Key West. Key West used to be an island too until all these bridges toward Miami created a peninsula sticking out from the mainland, like a crooked, bony, hundred-mile-long finger, beckoning Castro, "Come hither, my dear."

Castro huffs, but tourists, often of the foreign denomination—lots of Japanese lately—come hithering in droves. Dear tourists shed dollars as if M. Mouse was the printer, easy-get easy-go folks, like my new friend, old man billionaire Satosan, and his glowing lithe Miss Kira, the best-dressed goddess this side of Fifth Avenue.

Tourists come here to have a good time, but I wondered whether Skip's arrangement of kimono and skull on the weathered veranda of Shark Key's only cabin was doing much to cheer up Satosan and Miss Kira. Skip's artwork, to my surprise, was good. Who would ever think that bluff blistering renegade Skip could shape such subtlety? I'm an old man, of course, no longer likely to scare easy, but the sinister swaying twirls in which Skip arranged the red and orange batiked kimono on a structure of tied-together twigs, forming

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a slender female shape about to rise from a humble kneeling position, and the dainty touch with which he stuck the clay skull-mask on top, making it look up at the spectator, as if the alluring ogre were shyly offering her body to whatever perversion her new master might care to suggest . . . this was unnerving.

The smiling mask was early-Mexican, Aztec art from that ever-in-pain region of magic. The Aztecs were a cruel people, always butchering their own kind to appease wicked gods, then tossing aside the bones, which came back to haunt them. This particular skull image, lacquered gleaming white with inset slivers of transparent blue stone for eyes, silver stone for teeth, looked both woeful and mocking. My first impression was wrong. After Skip dropped us off on Shark Key, and as Satosan, Miss Kira, and I approached the weirdly constructed life-sized doll beckoning from the cabin's veranda, the artwork's appearance changed. It expressed a threat now. "You once tortured and killed me," the mannequin suggested in body-talk, "but now, my dears, you're mine, and you know just what I will do to get even . . ."

Behind us Skip's heavy outboard started up with a roar. I turned to see my protégé take off in Happy Hour's speedboat, cutting a silver swath through the sapphire sea. The confrontation with the ogre had to be Skip's doing. I had seen the skull-mask before, a tourist item Skip brought back from an ill-advised vacation in bad-bug infested inland Yucatan (the dear boy threw up for a week afterward), used as a paperweight for unpaid bills in his office at Happy Hour. Happy Hour is the decaying Key West hotel that Skip inherited from Old Skip last year. Old Skip was my old buddy.

Happy Hour had by that time worked up a habit of losing money. To fix things up, I became a kind of avuncular counselor to Skip. Old Skip made me that in his will. I was even to be paid: ten percent of any future profits, and as collateral part of the joint got deeded to me. "Turn Happy Hour around, Jannie," Old Skip whispered before breathing his last. "You won't fall foul of the dying, will you, Jannie? Make a man out of my only heir."

"Sure, old buddy." Through ninth grade Old Skip grew up with voodoo-ites he recruited from Key West's Little Haiti, where the chicken heads fly. He used to tell me about the spells he could cast. Powerful stuff you learn at that early age is never forgotten, Old Skip had me know. I didn't like the way Old Skip directed that last look. It burned into my forehead. Sure, I'd do those two little things for my old buddy. Get his hotel to stay on this side of Chapter

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Eleven. Do some major restructuring on Young Skip. Twin pieces of cake. "Sure, old Skippo."

After our return from sprinkling his dad's ashes into subsided storm waves curling gently near Shark Key, the only heir parked the speedboat into its slip and marched me down the pier to Happy Hour's office. I was shown the Mexican horror-head, made to marvel at such lifelike details as the mask's high cheekbones, hairline, and indentures at the temples. Skip also showed off the kimono, bought with his last credit card—maxing it in the process—at the expensive end of Key West's Duval, the city's main drag, to "show intent."

I asked if I knew the lucky recipient.

Skip smiled his macho smile.

"Not Miss Kira?"

Skip's intent was pure goodness of course. For what situation did our white knight face here? As Happy Hour's owner, Skip's first concern is the well-being of his guests. Satosan, rising late, going to bed early, shuffling about between naps on the hotel's back porch, beach, and pier, seems happy enough. But what about his plaything? Satosan, widowed, childless, entering the twilight zone of arteriosclerosis, lives out his life while globetrotting with this lovely and, Skip assured me, lonely lady—does anyone worry about Miss Kira's emotional needs?

Sure, I thought. Skip worries. Skip, Southern Florida's handout to emotionally neglected erotic beauties. Skip's animal—behold that gorilla chest, that lion's mane—libido will fill Miss Kira's void. Watch Skip handle Happy Hour's twenty-six-foot Chriscraft with the 200 HP Suzuki outboard, sway through his version of the cha-cha-hop to compact disked jazz in the bar at the end of Happy Hour's pier. Ignore Skip's drinking and drugging. Disregard the way he makes no use of his Harvard law degree. Don't think of Happy Hour's state of disarray. Pay no mind to Skip's self-inflicted run of defeats, "my loser's luck," as he calls it.

But then again, I thought, young and beautiful Miss Kira might be looking for some inspiring company. Satosan is really old, as old as I. Miss Kira's feeble companion smokes as much as he coughs. Satosan, dragging a leg, goes nowhere without his cane. He nods off between telling the same joke again. I've seen him wearing his dentures wrong way round.

"Right you are, Skip," I said. "When are you giving Miss Kira the kimono?"

Skip already did.

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"So how come it's still here?"

Because Miss Kira refused Skip's invitation to hanky-panky. Pure Indonesian cotton handwaxed and scraped to receive each individual organically pounded color, artistically cut into a seductive garment, did not perform for bad Skippo. Our loser stared at me, holding up the kimono.

I tsked.

"Can you believe that, Jannie?"

I'm sorry, I got carried away. I should have introduced myself before spilling half this tale of, so far, woe. Hi, this nose belongs to Jannie, former mini real-estate tycoon from Boston, now living it up at the lower end of the Florida Keys (as far as a decent man gets away from Miami without taking to water) in a big ramshackle house on Heron Cove, alone with Parrot. My wife died; she didn't like me. At my age I should be out of it too, but maybe, like Methuselah, I'm doomed to live forever: wide-awake longevity for my sins. Parrot didn't like me either but I whistle and dance for him now, grow his favorite sunflower seeds on the back porch, take him for walks on the beach of my cove, play him his favorite tapes (mating calls of the Australian pink-billed cockatoo). Parrot finally gave in and hangs upside down from his perch, sounding off endearing chirps, when I come home from being busy. I make out okay: a recovering egotist, finally engaged in the attempt to consider others, like feeble old Satosan and his young companion, out for a day's boating on calm and balmy seas, but suddenly, by Skip's mad dash back to Key West, faced with terminal horror. When everything works and the weather is right, little islands like Shark Key are like in the brochure: white sandy beaches, swaying coconut palms, mangrove in flower, long-legged white herons, a reef close-by to snorkel around purple groupers and yellowbacked snappers. Florida delivers. But only when your boat floats. Do these unsuspecting tourists know that they are marooned on an inhospitable fleck of a little isle, furnished with nothing but a weather-battered cabin next to a grove of palms populated by rabid rats and surrounded by ubiquitous mangroves attracting slimy low- and wildlife between the stilts they use for roots? Islets like Shark Key are nice picnic places best left before sundown. Little vampire insects come out at sunset, vultures circle forever, looking down to see if anyone is ready to give up blood or ghost. Watch those seagulls on the little beach where Skip put us off so treacherously just now. Seagulls ravish exhausted people. Skip's boat was still in view, circling us at a

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distance, like the ever-checking sharks that give the isle its name.

"Joke?" Satosan asked, gumming a denture.

I didn't quite think so.

Skip had to be after Satosan for ransom, and after Miss Kira so that he could manipulate Satosan. And me? Skip threw me in as Satosan and Miss Kira might not have risked the pleasure trip without me. I can think quickly at times. I can also catch the lowest motive. There would be a nice twist here, legally safe, profitable to bad Skippo only.

Have you noticed how things often set out well enough? And then turn out as bad as things can be when the stars of destiny shift positions?

Happy Hour Hotel, Old Skip's lifelong claim to fame, had been doing just dandy for years with beautiful waiters twirling and skidding about on the terrace serving lightly broiled catch of the day, the luxurious pier bar, glorious rooms with a view, and complimentary speedboat excursions for guests in suites, paying top dollar. We all get into grooves—why worry if things go good? It's easy to forget that anything on Key West is Wet Tropics and that our real estate is held up by termites holding hands and that beautiful staff steals us blind as we loll about with the guests and pretty soon those very guests check in next door and the bank manager keeps leaving his card at the reception desk.

Skip, triumphantly home from Harvard, also lolled about with the guests. Then Old Skip took off and the bank manager didn't leave his card but stood on the table in the hotel's entrance and wanted all loans repaid right now or there would be that auction.

Which would be good for me. I've bought abused hotels at auctions for cheap before, made them as good as new again at little expense, sold them dear. That's how I can keep Parrot on smoked salmon and myself on shrimp with horseradish sauce and trimmings for both. Promises to Old Skip? *Make a man out of my son,* says Old Skip. So I bankrupt the hoodlum, then hire him back as a wage slave and won't let go until he shows signs of improving. *Turn Happy Hour around,* says Old Skip. So I just snap up the old thing, run it properly for a change, advertise it right, and sell out to the suckers.

Old Jannie does it again.

But why would he?

As I thought that way, constructively in the capitalist manner, following American optimism, letting the markets decide, adding another two bucks to the pile, I felt a sudden cold shiver. I also

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sniffed a whiff of tobacco and honey, of what Old Skip used to smoke in his corncob pipe.

"Okay," I said. "Just kidding, old buddy."

More shiver, more whiff.

"Leave this to me," I said. "I may know just what to do, old buddy."

Young Skip would run after me. "Things are bad."

"That's good," I would say, watching him sweat.

"It's good that you see things are bad," I would say, watching him stare.

"Because only then can you change your situation," I would say, hearing him go: "Nah!"

Maybe it's today's America. This is an era of no patience. Maybe it's because of the videos we slide into the VCR. Hollywood programs the happy end, and it'll hit us in just another ninety minutes. All the audience ever does is sit back. Maybe it's because of modern travel. Relax, snowbird, give it another hour or so and the nice pilot drops you off on the beaches.

"You promised Dad to fix this, Jannie," Young Skip would say, waving bad bills.

Now, in order to appease Old Skip's spook, frightening poor old Parrot by swishing about on my veranda everytime I come back from Key West, I'd better do something.

I tell you, I did plenty. I called on all my strength. I remembered my youthful escapade to the White Cloud Monastery near pre-Communist Beijing and rowed around Heron Cove chanting the Platform Sutra in neo-Sanskrit. I sent my mind back to sojourns on the coast of Maine and burned incense while reciting the Ultimate Power song in Algonquin. I reread the life of Silly Ivan Osikin by Pyotr Davilev O (an essay on how-not-to that eventually made me flee Boston forever). I even made myself a perch and hung it next to Parrot's so that we could roost upside down together and overcome our chasm between lifeforms. I also called on the wisdom of Old Skip himself and whiffing and sniffing together we remembered Pearl Harbor. The various factors taken into account, the solution came to me slowly.

Skip on the bad track. Happy Hour Hotel going down. Very well. One does not swim against the tide.

Tides turn. Just catch the moment.

That Happy Hour still attracted guests who stayed had to be due to its bar in the old boathouse at the end of the pier. Old Skip had it paneled with old rosewood orginally used in the state cabins of a

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clipper wrecked on a Key West reef a century and a half ago. The bar's glasses are long-stemmed crystal found in another ancient vessel. Happy Hour's bar stocks no bottles, only decanters, crystal too, of course, each with its little chain and silver label and the glow of its fluid magic. The teak counter is a solid plank cut from a giant sugar maple, polished to show the beauty of its infinitely mottled grain, like the Ch'an master's metaphor of the mirrors, each reflecting the entire universe. The bar stools are New Guinea teak, suitably topped with crocodile-skin seats. There's a large-scale model of a Malayan proa, the native sailing vessel, as graceful as a Zen poet's final thought. Miss Kira was standing next to the proa, in a simple shimmering dress, tall, stately, with finely chiseled features, antelope eyes, and the mouth of a Far Eastern elf. Miss Kira is half Malayan herself.

Satosan was limping about near the bar, lifting his after-dinner brandy while Miss Kira smiled her welcome. I had known the two for a while now. Satosan and I shared breakfast on his suite's balcony most mornings, served by Happy Hour's last beautiful waiter. I would cut the number-one guest's grapefruit into segments while Satosan told me why he didn't collect Van Gogh paintings.

"Janniesan."

"Yes, Satosan?"

"Van Goghs are dead now."

I'd pass the grapefruit. Satosan would bow his thanks, smile, dig in, slurp, look up, laugh. "Departing old men must invest in life."

Satosan could be very clear at times, albeit briefly, and before going into long dozes, sometimes with his eyes open, and staring at the sea that seemed to give him visions of eternity so enjoyable that he couldn't abide interference, not even Miss Kira's, whom he'd wave away if she moved into his moments.

She'd smile at me then. "Stepping between the infinities, Sato-Sensei doesn't like that." Whenever Satosan seemed to reach his inner being Miss Kira liked to call him Teacher.

He'd also enjoy his lower levels, while watching pelicans, for instance, when they dive-bombed the surf for their meals of baby fish. Satosan said he couldn't do that kind of copulation anymore, dive in with such abandon. He'd like to, however. He'd stretch his arms and encompass the entire bay, making it change into the great female receptive. Following up, we'd be another two old men comparing sexual skill of long ago, like Miami retirees who, in parking

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lots or shopping malls, endlessly discuss what will never be again and most likely never was.

"But there's Miss Kira."

He nodded. So much was true.

I asked Miss Kira what I could get her. I also got my own. Doing our slow dance around the Malayan sailing vessel, holding our long-stemmed crystals, we managed to blend our minds somewhat.

Was I really Skip's uncle?

I said I was everybody's uncle.

Hers too?

Yes. Parrot's too. I told her about my wife. I told her it wasn't enough to make all that up to the bird.

"So you're good now?"

I disagreed. I aim for beyond good and evil.

"Where there's nothing at all?"

I have no idea what nothing at all could be but that's where I am going. Pyotr Davilev O has the shaman claim from the Sixth Platform in neo-Sanskrit that nowhere is where Superior Man may find his values. Not later. Right now.

"You're not being silly?" Miss Kira asked.

I told her I often am indeed silly but that I hoped I was not just then. I also told her how the Chinese characters for Sage and Child are identical.

She rephrased her accusation. "You're an innocent."

I said I liked that better.

"I'm a whore," Miss Kira said. "You want to hear more?"

Old men should learn to listen.

I heard about her father, a Japanese manager working out a contract in Kuala Lumpur, Malaya, running a facility where native girls assemble plastic weaponry that becomes credit card–financed Christmas gifts for the kids in New York, L.A., and Chicago. Japanese-employed assembling girls are color-coded. Subdued colors, as shown on duck-billed caps and shoulder badges, show higher ranks. Miss Kira's mother's code was a nice pale shade of a demure burnt orange. Manager Ishimura gave her his orders directly and often mentioned marriage, but then, suddenly, his stint was up and he had to go now but maybe he'd send for Miss Kira's mother at an as yet not to be specified date. He was making no commitment but this was a target he would definitely strive to hit, maybe later.

Miss Kira was born; her mother saved for many years and flew to Japan. Vice president Ishimura already had a wife in Tokyo. He

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also had another mistress. Both incumbents were jealous. Ishimura-san also happened to be loaded down with some gambling debts, was due to go to the hospital for a sinus operation, had been summoned for operating his Lexus under the influence of rotgut sake. This was not a good time. "Are you okay? I could come up with enough to pay for a speedy flight home. You're sure? Nice little girl, you really think she looks like me? Why did you call her Kira? That's not a Japanese name. Anyway, from all my *kokoro,* good luck and *sayonara.*"

Miss Kira, caressing the model proa's keel, said that *kokoro* means "heart."

"So what did your mother do?" I asked, beginning a ritual dance around Miss Kira in tune to piped music: Bill Evans on piano, Scott LaFaro on bass, Paul Motian on drums, "Waltz for Miss Kira." She applauded, telling me that I have the endangered-species crane's long spindly legs, and that a crane is a holy bird in Japan, that she trusted me because of my holy legs.

We danced together. A pity I had left Parrot at home. He would have watched upside down. Antique Viking and Modern Exotic, joined by fingertips only, doing pre-Freudian Viennese one-two-threes performed by advanced U.S. jazz.

Sato-Sensei came to bow, smile, and leave for his balcony to watch the infinities filtered by a full moon.

"Then what happened?" I asked Miss Kira.

Miss Kira's mother became a barmaid in downtown Tokyo, the famous Ginza. She did well for a while. Miss Kira herself became a hostess. She did better for longer, but all that better didn't add up to much, until she ran into Satosan.

"You know how I staged that meeting?" Miss Kira asked.

I almost skipped back into dance again to Tuto-tones (Miles Davis now). Such a good word Miss Kira used there: *stage.* It's true that man cannot do much more than at least try to ride the big waves that would otherwise drown him, but there are times that Chance smiles and we can set up a bit of a wavelet ourselves.

"How did you stage a change of fate, Miss Kira?"

"Come with me, Janniesan . . ."

We're on Fujimicho (viewing Mount Fuji but there's eternal smog these days) Cemetery in Tokyo and Miss Kira has visited her mother's concrete-encased urn. She has seen Satosan descend from a showroom-condition collector's item Lincoln 1979, "the last of the big ones." She saw him prostrate himself on a reed mat his chauffeur

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carefully unrolled. Satosan pays his respects to his wife. Satosan and Miss Kira are on similar schedules, for the scenes are repeated exactly one week later. It occurred to Miss Kira that something to her benefit could be done.

"I became a Kwannon of the Graves," Miss Kira said. " 'Kwannon of the Graves' is a Japanese police term. Kwannon is a bodhisattva of compassion, a lovely lady. Japanese prostitutes, emulating the divine appearance, dress up in flowing robes and shuffle demurely near rich men lamenting loss of spouse. The bereaved male is subsequently engaged in commiserating conversation, aroused, and charged exorbitant fees."

"Ah," I said.

I held up my crystal, to be refilled by a charmingly efficient Skip, in whites with an impeccably hand-tied black butterfly—Skip likes to do that at times. The dear boy is not really allergic to work. He single-handedly repaired a good part of Happy Hour's rotted-out pier, doing a good job too, swinging hammers and fine-tuning power tools, but he became despondent. There was the bank manager hounding Skip. There was a bad drinking habit. There was cocaine. There was me, not helping out.

Happy Hour slid back further, even Satosan took note. Miss Kira was despatched to sample other places. Skip had to hurry.

"Shall I take y'all out for a trip to Shark Key tomorrow?" Skip asked, smiling nastily across the bar. "How would y'all like that?"

There was darkness behind that dazzle. Miss Kira noticed too. "Is he jealous?"

I didn't think so.

"Ah?" I asked. "You charged Satosan an exorbitant fee?"

"Sato-Sensei charged *me* an exorbitant fee," Miss Kira said.

Aha. A good old man adding some finishing touches on what destiny is about to do to him. Show an ordinary man a trap and he is already halfway caught, but some of us manage to turn fate a tad, to the mutual benefit of all interested parties. So maybe Sato had a right to the Sensei title. The man does have credits. Satosan's company sells useful gadgets worldwide, cheaper and better than anyone else in his field. He truly loved his wife. He also truly liked what Miss Kira might have to offer. He took her everywhere.

"A daughter-disciple," Miss Kira said.

Beats hanging out in noisy bars and drafty cemeteries, I thought. "You give him a good time?"

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"His wife's departing suggestion," Miss Kira said. She touched my holy leg. "Now what, Jannie?"

"Now what, Jannie?" Here we are on Shark Key, reading the message Skip's skull and kimono demon offers from a twiggy claw. I respectfully took the note.

Tell Satosan he has a choice, Jannie. Buy Happy Hour for a million and he's back in his suite before nightfall. You and Miss Kira will be picked up once I cash Satosan's check after the closing tomorrow. Hold on to this note as I'll want it back. Okay? Okay.

I looked up but by that time the villain was far away.

Kidnapping for ransom disguised as a legitimate deal. Skip cashes the check and flees. Satosan holds a worthless Happy Hour Hotel. Skip's proposed crime earns up to life, and Florida likes you to spend that in a chain gang.

"Hello?" Satosan asked, wandering about vaguely among the scavenging seagulls, admiring a vulture circle, wafting away a mosquito or two.

I found the cooler and the duffel bags I had hidden in the mangroves earlier on, at daybreak, riding out in a rented cabin cruiser. We had a pot and a pan, a camping stove, plates, cups, and utensils, mosquito netting and sleeping bags, diving equipment, freshly roasted Hawaiian Kona coffee, mangoes and guavas, soy sauce, a tube of wasabi mustard, a yard of French bread, butter, key lime pie.

"Hello?" asked Miss Kira.

"Sashimi?" I asked. "Nap first? A drop of Armagnac for the Sensei? How about a bit of a swim?"

Satosan wanted all of that, in reverse order. I spear-dived a sizable jewfish that Miss Kira cut up for sashimi. Two snappers became the main course. Satosan snatched five lobsters. Miss Kira prepared seaweed.

After lunch Satosan wanted to see Skip's note.

"You knew this would happen?"

I had seen Skip's dark look in the bar, the glare of the dear boy's demons. We'd have them turn round. No good getting rid of demons. They're helpful fellows if you can choose their direction.

We slept that afternoon, then Satosan and I, wrapped in mosquito netting, hid in the mangroves. Happy Hour's speedboat turned up at dusk that changed to darkness as Skip beached the boat and jumped lightly down on the sand, ready to pick up Satosan and his

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check. We aren't kidding here. You lose some, you win some. This was a winner. I'll say that much for bad Skippo, he did remember to bring a hamper of food and suitable gear for Miss Kira's and my comfort that night. I had expected no less. No harm in the dear boy. Skip only wanted a million from Satosan's billion. There we have Skip, peering at the scene ahead, looking for his quarry. Nobody home except his own creation.

The full moon above the mangroves helped.

Miss Kira's training as a courtesan helped too. She really can dance.

And I can sing. And Satosan likes the kind of weird percussion you hear as background to Japanese Noh plays: odd bangs and clatters. We had found empty cans and a steel drum after swimming, and Satosan made a shell rattle that sounded eerie.

Sound effects were good, the dance was great. Skip staggered back as the skeleton in the red and orange kimono, topped with her grinning white death-mask, transparent stone teeth, and eyes shining, slowly raised herself, then tripped off the veranda. Miss Kira cleverly assumed the same starting position Skip himself originally created. To him there was no change in the way he left and found Key Shark. Miss Kira became nasty Pinocchia, in a dance of approaching death, with Satosan on percussion, Jannie producing off-stage screaming.

Skip, having had a hard day, may have been somewhat the worse for abuse of assorted drugs. The spectacle may have completed his worst hallucination. Skip turned. Skip ran.

There were two boats behind Skip now. The second was a Sheriff's Patrol with friendly Officer Wekko at the wheel. Wekko and his grumpy mini-mongrel Barnie are my neighbors, both newborn anarchists who believe in letting things take care of themselves with as much noninterference as bending over backwards may achieve. Wekko, however, is a friend and doesn't mind playacting if requested politely.

"How're we doing, Skip?" Wekko asked, taking the key out of Skip's speedboat's dashboard.

"Can we talk for a minute, Skip?" I asked.

Wekko, Satosan, and Miss Kira started cooking dinner as Skip and I strolled about on the beach.

"You set me up setting you up?" Skip asked.

"Dear boy," I said, "you check yourself voluntarily into the clinic and get yourself cleaned up while Miss Kira takes over Happy Hour's debt."

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We walked arm in arm. There was good coffee aroma around, and the fragrance of broiled fish wrapped in the right choice of seaweeds. Lobster tails cooked. French bread crackled. Miss Kira whipped cream to top the key lime pie.

"Not Satosan?" Skip asked.

"Satosan will sign over the million to Miss Kira as a farewell present," I said. "Miss Kira will run Happy Hour until we deem you worthy."

"Shit," Skip said.

"Miss Kira will be holding your paper so that she can foreclose at any moment, and your dad left me a small but controlling interest. Maybe you can come back, but the terms will have to be tough."

"What *is* this?" Skip asked. "You want me to turn myself inside out? You go screw yourself, old man."

Neatly uniformed Deputy Sheriff Wekko joined us, handcuffs and pistol barrel gleaming on his belt.

"There's the note in your very own handwriting," I said. "There's your very own chain gang waiting on the mainland."

"There's the disease," Wekko said "Natural-born alcoholics and junkies cannot drink or drug. Once they stop they can face their situation."

"You too?" Skip asked. "Is that why you make me serve all that free water?"

"I come for the music," Wekko said, "before you know, you may enjoy your work. Get some live jazz in that Happy Hour's bar. You'll make us all happy."

Satosan was playing his cans and drum again, shaking his rattles.

"Come and get it," Miss Kira called.

It never quite ends well, but that seems to go with the planet. Satosan's terminal cancer was diagnosed as entering the painful stage. We saw him float into the infinities on small tumblers of hospital-supplied morphine. Miss Kira held his hands. Satosan left his fortune to a trust fund in Tokyo, with proceeds going to the fight with earthly discomfort. Skip escaped from the clinic but then tried on his own and is using Happy Hour work as a discipline to stay clean. Miss Kira has Wekko and his self-centered diminutive mutt Barnie over for dinner at Happy Hour every other Thursday. She won't stay at the hotel and married me so that she can stay in the country. Skip comes over to learn to chant the Platform Sutra in neo-Sanskrit and pursue his effort to impress Miss Kira. There has been one

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important change: Wekko's formerly asocial hybrid Barnie has taken it upon herself to visit Parrot. They howl together. Old Skip's spook has found better things to do than bother me with its whiffs and shivers.

As Pyotr Davilev O and the Ch'an master have it, just try and be a little more negative and you'll find that things are getting better and better.

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STATEMENT OF OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, AND CIRCULATION (Required by 39 U.S.C. 3685)
1. Title of Publication: Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine.
2. Publication No. 523-610.
3. Date of Filing: October 7, 1994.
4. Frequency of Issue: Every 28 days with special issues in March and October.
5. No. of Issues Published Annually: 13.
6. Annual Subscription Price: $34.97.
7. Complete Mailing Address of Known Office of Publication (Street, City, County, State, and ZIP+4)(Not Printer): 1540 Broadway, New York, NY 10036.
8. Complete Mailing Address of the Headquarters or General Business Offices of the Publisher (Not Printer): 1540 Broadway, New York, NY 10036.
9. Full Names and Complete Mailing Addresses of Publisher and Editor: Publisher: Christoph Haas-Heye, 1540 Broadway, New York, NY 10036; Editor: Janet Hutchings, 1540 Broadway, New York, NY 10036.
10. Owner: Bantam Doubleday Dell Magazines, 1540 Broadway, New York, NY 10036.
11. Known Bondholders, Mortgagees, and Other Security Holders Owning or Holding 1 Percent or More of Total Amount of Bonds, Mortgages, or Other Securities: NONE.
12. For Completion by Non-Profit Organizations Authorized to Mail at Special Rates. The Purpose, Function, and Non-Profit Status of This Organization and the Exempt Status for Federal Income Tax Purposes: N/A.
13. Publication Name: Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine.
14. Issue Date for Circulation Data Below: 8/94.
15. Extent and Nature of Circulation: Average No. Copies Each Issue During Preceding 12 Months: (A) Total No. Copies (Net Press Run): 242,600; (B) Paid and/or Requested Circulation: (1) Sales Through Dealers and Carriers, Street Vendors, and Counter Sales (Not Mailed): 8,000; (2) Paid or *Requested Mail Subscriptions: 191,000; (C) Total Paid and/or Requested Circulation: 199,000; (D) Free Distribution by Mail*, (Samples, Complimentary, and Other Free Copies): 300; (E) Free Distribution Outside the Mail (Carriers or Other Means): NONE;(F) Total Free Distribution (Sum of D and E): 300; (G) Total Distribution (Sum of C and F): 199,300; (H)Copies Not Distributed: (1) Office Use, Leftovers, Spoiled: 3,300; (2) Returns from News Agents: 40,000; (I) TOTAL (Sum of G, H1, and H2 should equal net press run shown in A): 242,600.
Actual No. Copies of Single Issue Published Nearest to Filing Date: (A) Total No. Copies (Net Press Run): 243,800; (B) Paid and/or Requested Circulation: (1) Sales Through Dealers and Carriers, Street Vendors, and Counter Sales: 8,000; (2) Mail Subscriptions: 196,000; (C) Total Paid and/or Requested Circulation: 204,000; (D) Free Distribution by Mail (Samples, Complimentary, and Other Free Copies): 300; (E) Free Distribution Outside the Mail (Carriers and Other Means): NONE. (F) Total Free Distribution (Sum of D and E): 300; (G) Total Distribution (Sum of C and F): 204,300; (H) Copies Not Distributed: (1) Office Use, Leftovers, Spoiled: 500; (2) Return from News Agents: 39,000; (I) TOTAL (Sum of G, H1, and H2) should equal Net Press Run shown in A): 243,800.
16. Statement Printed in February 1995 Issue.
17. I certify that the statements made by me above are correct and complete.

Christoph Haas-Heye
Publisher

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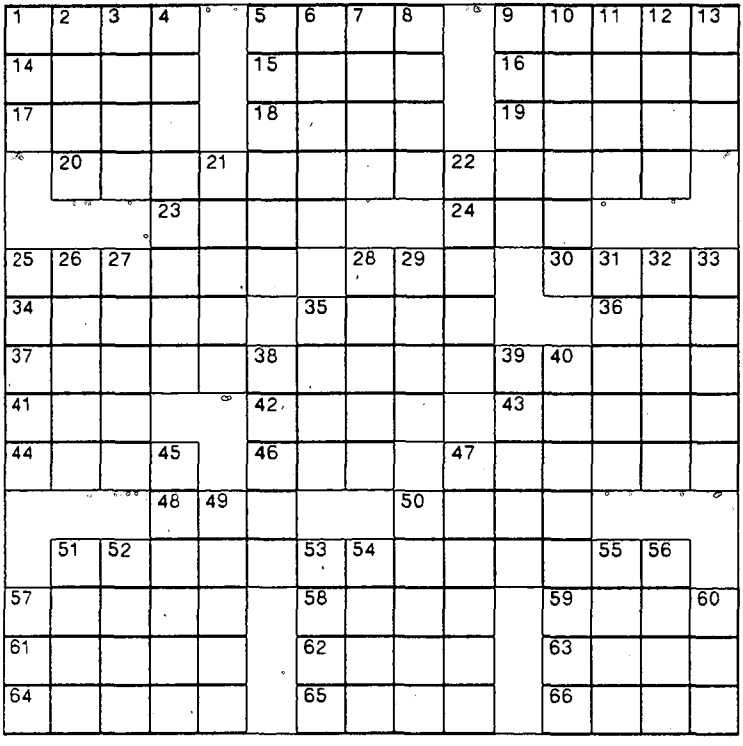
THE MYSTERY CROSSWORD

by Beth Allison



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a NEW short story by

ANN CLEEVES

Like this new story for EQMM, *many of Ann Cleeves's novels deal with a sport that ought to be the gentlest of occupations. An avid birdwatcher herself, and the wife of an ornithologist, Ms. Cleeves has spun six mystery novels around the adventures of birdwatchers in the north of England. The latest in the series is* The Mill on the Shore *(Fawcett Books, 9/94) . . .*

THE HARMLESS PURSUITS OF ARCHIBALD STAMP

by ANN CLEEVES

I read the report in the *Journal*. It was very brief. The Magistrates Court had ordered the destruction of a collection of birds' eggs which had been found in an attic in a house in North Shields. The collection had been discovered by the police after the death of an elderly man. Hidden in a safe in the same house were notebooks which showed that the eggs had been illegally taken. They had not been inherited from a Victorian grandfather. In the newspaper a name was given, but at first it was unfamiliar. To me he had always been Dr. Stamp. The first name seemed strangely theatrical. It reminded me of a music hall comedian.

The eggs were destroyed at the insistence of the court and the implication of the newspaper report was that this was unnecessary, rather a shame. They were beautiful objects in their own right. What harm could it do now to keep them? Perhaps they could be donated to Newcastle's Hancock Museum, where schoolboys could marvel at them and become interested themselves in the natural world. They were meticulously catalogued in the hidden notebooks.

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All had been taken from the north of England. Mr. Archibald Stamp, for that was how his neighbours had known him, had not liked to travel far in pursuit of his pleasures.

There was an address in the newspaper too, and the next day I went to visit it. The house was a substantial Edwardian semi with a large and overgrown garden. A moth trap had been left outside to rust and two bamboo poles were set at each end of a niche through the bushes. Between them Dr. Stamp would have strung a mist net to catch migrant birds and ring them. He had always been an exceptional naturalist.

When I knew him he had lived in Jesmond, Newcastle's superior suburb. He had rather a grand flat, which I fancy he must have inherited from affluent parents. He wouldn't have chosen it himself. He had worked at the university, hiding from students, immersing himself in his botanical research. He was an expert on grasses. I thought he must have moved out to the coast on retirement, attracted by the thought of a garden.

I had opened the gate and walked halfway up the path without thinking, then paused, feeling ridiculous, wondering why I was there. I imagined the neighbours staring at me and could not turn and run away. Instead I walked on to the door and rang the bell. I did not expect a reply, but a woman appeared. She was small, attractive in a well-groomed WI sort of way. I was astounded. It never occurred to me that Dr. Stamp might have married.

"Yes?" she said. Her voice was pleasant, not in the least off-putting.

"I was looking for Dr. Stamp." It was all I could think of to say.

"Oh dear," she said, and very kindly she explained that he was dead. She invited me in for a tea but I said I would not intrude. Even from the doorstep the house smelled like the Jesmond flat, of his tobacco and books. I was not sure I could control myself if I saw the familiar furniture. I knew he would not have changed that. So we talked on the doorstep. She was a neighbour, it seemed, and had taken on the task of going through his things. There was no one else to do it.

She broached the subject of the egg collection herself. She thought it a pity that the authorities had made so much fuss. Perhaps stealing birds' eggs was against the rules, but it wasn't a real crime, was it? Not like burglary or assault. It was a gentle, harmless occupation and they should have left well enough alone.

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"Did you know him then?" she asked, just before I left. "You were friends?"

"I suppose we were at one time," I said. "I owe my interest in natural history to him."

"Ah," she said, sadly. "He was a great example."

I first met Dr. Stamp when I was eleven. It was a time of change—the year of the eleven plus and the first Beatles hit. We lived in a neat little council house on the edge of the city, my mam, my dad, and me. My dad was a nervy man. Mam had married him because he looked like a film star, thin and soulful, but he hadn't lived up to expectations. He worked for the post office as a sorter; the long fingers which had attracted Mam and made her think of a violinist were useful for flicking letters into pigeonholes.

By the time I was eleven, Mam had given up trying to improve him and turned her attentions to me. She had plans which involved my going up in the world and providing her with the lifestyle she had always wanted, a lifestyle which she had seen in the films. She had taken me to the pictures since I was a toddler—not to the Saturday club, which she thought common, but to adult afternoon matinees. She always dressed up for these outings in a hat and high-heeled shoes. When I passed the eleven plus she chose the grammar school in the middle of town because the uniform was smarter, though it was two bus rides away. There was no metro then.

That spring I joined the Ornithological Society. There was a poster in the library advertising for junior members. I took the details back to my mother hesitantly, afraid that she would think joining was common too, and refuse me permission, but she was surprisingly encouraging.

"They meet in the university," she said. "You'll get to know all sorts of nice people there."

The first time she took me herself, came with me to the lecture-theatre door and pushed me through it, half hoping, half afraid that she might be invited in too. She sent my father to collect me. After that, Dr. Stamp always delivered me home.

He must have been there at that indoor meeting, though I don't remember it. I noticed him first on the field trip to the Farnes, which took place on an unusually hot afternoon in May. There was a coach to Seahouses, then Billy Shiels's boat to Staple Island. My mother had given up her weekly visit to the pictures to pay for it. I still remember it as the happiest day of my life. Better than sex when I

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finally made it with a woman, or finding out that I'd got a first at university.

Everything glittered that day. There were puffins and guillemots, and scaly, reptilian shags. So close I could reach out and touch them. The smell of guano and seaweed. And Dr. Stamp explaining, lending his binoculars so the birds hit me in the eye, naming everything for me.

He was a tall man with a slightly misformed spine which gave him the air of always looking on the ground. But when he *did* tilt back his head to look at you he had startling eyes which glittered like the water and a sudden shy smile that included you and made you feel special.

There was only one other recruit to the poster campaign and he was on the Farnes trip, sharing Dr. Stamp's attentions. His name was Will Pickering and he was a year older than I. He had red hair and the sort of freckles you usually only see on a girl. He lived in Jesmond too, in a big terraced house full of children. His father was a solicitor, and his mother wrote articles for women's magazines. They never seemed much like parents to me. They listened to rock music and, according to Will, took drugs. I had never met adults like them before.

The three of us—Will, Dr. Stamp, and I—became unlikely companions. Will and I were friends, though I always felt that in some sense we were rivals for Dr. Stamp's admiration. He suggested trips into the hills, and to Holy Island, early in the morning before the trippers arrived. But not every weekend. Some days he claimed to be busy.

These excursions may not sound like much now, but for Will and me they were adventures. My parents had never owned a car and were frightened, anyway, to leave familiar territory. We never took a holiday. Will's parents were always busy, wrapped up in work and the yearly babies, desperate not to miss out on the sixties, and they had little time for him. So our bird-watching expeditions into the Northumberland countryside were an escape and a revelation. Dr. Stamp was our hero. We would have done anything for him.

He waited two years before he initiated us into the mysteries of egg collecting. I suppose he wanted to be sure of us. He did not attempt to justify or explain. He told us flatly that it was illegal and if we wanted we could have nothing to do with it. With a shy pride he showed us his collection in the flat in Jesmond. In a room we had never been in before, there was a huge mahogany cabinet

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of the sort you'd see in a museum, with tray upon tray of eggs. He could tell us where each of them had come from. He said it was a scientific study. His real life's work. And they *were* beautiful. Even I could see that.

Then he explained the delicate operation of preparing the eggs. Only schoolboys poked a hole at each end and blew them, he said with disdain. He showed us his tools—a dentist's drill to puncture the side of the egg, a pipette, and a syringe. Air was introduced through fine tubing to remove the contents, then water to flush out the shell. The trick was to collect the eggs early, before the chicks had started to form, when the contents were sufficiently liquid for easy removal. That was the skill. Occasionally he'd misjudged the timing, he said regretfully, and he'd had to use an embryo solvent to dissolve the chick inside. That could take weeks and it wasn't ideal. Even that did not put us off. Perhaps it even encouraged us. We had to prove to him that we weren't squeamish.

"Well?" he had said, flashing us one of his magic smiles. "Are you on then?"

Of course we were on. How could we refuse him? The trips to the hills took on a new significance. Winter was spent in planning, in making the maps. Dr. Stamp belonged to a network which shared information. There was the challenge of avoiding detection by wardens and police officers, though I believe that Dr. Stamp exaggerated this danger to thrill us. We never saw anyone on our raids to the Tyne Valley, the Simonsides, or the Cheviot.

There was a ritual to the preparation on the day of the theft. We always took the same equipment: maps, thermos flasks lined with cotton wool in which to hide the eggs, climbing gear. Sometimes a rubber dinghy to get to islands or lakes where grebes or ducks bred. I see now that this had much in common with a heroin addict preparing a fix. Much of the pleasure came from anticipation.

In the breeding season we thought of little else. Quite often we spent the whole weekend with Dr. Stamp. He had a tent and there was a ritual in setting up camp too. Everything had to be done in the correct order. He was firm about that. My mother was delighted that I went out with him so often. She had convinced herself that when the time came he would obtain a job for me. Something clean and secure. It did not appear odd to her, or apparently to anyone else, that a middle-aged man should enjoy the company of young boys.

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There was only one comment so far as I remember. A sixth former in my school who was going to Oxford to read zoology bumped into me in the library and seemed to recognise me.

"Oh yes," he said. "You're one of Doc Stamp's little boys, aren't you?" And sniggered. I didn't know what he meant. You must realise that although it was supposed to be a permissive age, that was a much more innocent time. And in fact nothing overtly sexual ever occurred on the trips into the hills, though we always shared the same tent. I do recall physical horseplay, slaps on the back, wrestling, but it seemed quite innocent, as I've explained. A part of the experience, like collecting the eggs. What Dr. Stamp got out of it, I really can't say.

Will grew up quicker than I did. I see that now. I suppose it was the family he came from. He had to stand on his own feet. It made him more sexually aware. He began to resist the contact, the arm around the shoulder. It made him question the whole setup.

We were on Cuthbert's Crag, a rocky outcrop of Cheviot which forms a cliff where peregrines breed. It was one of our regular sites. Dr. Stamp liked to get there early in the season, before the illegal falconers who collected the eggs for their own use: to incubate and hatch. It was a cold day. There was still a patch of snow on the top.

It was Will's turn to go down the rope. He was poised at the top, leaning back with the rope taking his weight, when he said suddenly, as if the words had just come into his head:

"This is wrong, you know. Illegal."

He was always impulsive. It wasn't the best moment for a confrontation.

"You've always known it's illegal," Dr. Stamp said.

"You should stop," Will said, "before you get caught."

"Oh, I'll never get caught." The words were slow and pedantic, slightly chiding, as if we'd misidentified a plant he'd pointed out only the week before. We should have known better.

"We could tell someone."

"I don't think so." Dr. Stamp gave each word consideration. "After all, you are involved too. And who would the authorities believe?"

He let out the rope and Will jerked several yards down the rock. Dr. Stamp held him there. He was a strong man, very fit.

"If I let go," Dr. Stamp said conversationally, "you would probably lose your balance and fall. I'd say it was an accident. Davey would back me up, wouldn't you, Davey? Davey wouldn't let me down."

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He smiled across at me as if he knew me so well that he did not need an answer.

"Bring me up," Will shouted. His voice seemed distant and thin.

"Oh no," Dr. Stamp said. "Not without the eggs."

So Will had to climb down to the eyrie, with the female peregrine screaming around his head, not knowing whether Dr. Stamp would pull him back or not. There was a ledge where he could stand. He took the eggs and wrapped them in cotton wool and put them into a box and then into his rucksack. Only then did Dr. Stamp take the strain of the rope and bring him back. We behaved quite normally for the rest of the day. What else could we do?

I tried to persuade myself that the conversation on Cuthbert's Crag had never happened or that it was some sort of joke, but it affected Will badly. He became nervy and tense, reminding me, in a strange way, of my father. I think it was my fault. I think he felt betrayed. If I'd shouted at Dr. Stamp: "No, I won't back you up. No way," Will might not have been so shaken. He avoided me, though his parents had me round one evening when he was out. They sat me in their big chaotic kitchen, with kids' paintings on the walls, amid the dried flowers and cookery books, and asked me what was wrong. Even they had noticed.

"You're his friend, David," they said. "Is something worrying him?"

I just said no, not as far as I knew.

Even now I'm not quite sure why I lied. Partly it was because you never told parents important things, and if Will hadn't chosen to confide in them that was his business. But that wasn't the real reason. The real reason was Dr. Stamp. I knew the conversation on Cuthbert's Crag hadn't been a joke.

That summer Will failed his exams, and despite their Socialist principles, his parents sent him away to boarding school in Scotland. I think he asked to go. I never saw him again. Later I heard that he hadn't settled and there'd been some sort of breakdown.

I saw less of Dr. Stamp. I still went to the Ornithological Society meetings and the field trips, but when he invited me for weekends away I pleaded too much homework, or said that my father was ill, which was often true. He made no effort to persuade me. I realise now that young boys came after me as, no doubt, there had been others before. He collected us as he collected successive clutches of eggs. I went away to college and took up my own life.

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I came across him again six months ago. He was in a dinghy on a small lake where Shelduck breed, so I knew what he was up to. I was surprised that he was still alive. I saw that although I'd always thought of him as old, he hadn't been in those days when we'd spent so much time together. He would have been much the same age as I am now. That made a difference to my opinion of him. What is a permissible eccentricity in an elderly man seems squalid, rather disgusting, in someone younger.

I was counting merlins on the moor. My obsession, as you see, had taken a different turn. I was now a bona fide ornithologist and held a government license to approach the nests of specially protected birds and had trained for a ringing permit. I used the skills taught by Dr. Stamp to find the nests. I would stare at the eggs in a detached, rather voyeuristic way, like someone looking at a pornographic magazine, but I would not touch them. I would make a careful record of the site and walk away. When the eggs hatched I would ring the chicks. My pleasure came in holding the warm and downy birds in my palm.

Dr. Stamp was alone in the dinghy. He had no boys to wade ashore for him. I suppose times have changed. Everyone now can get into the countryside, and the pursuits he had to offer must have seemed tame to a new generation.

I stood at the boggy edge of the pool and watched him. He was intent on rowing to the bank and did not see me until he was almost upon me. I think he must have recognised me, because he half stood in the boat and gave me that sudden, boyish smile which had charmed me all those years before. Perhaps he thought I was there for the same reason as him, that I had been corrupted after all.

The movement unbalanced the boat. He lost his footing and tipped into the water. It was not deep there, but he was encumbered by his rucksack with its eggs, and his binoculars and his waders. Perhaps he hit his head as he fell. It all happened so quickly that I do not remember. The surface was covered with weed and I could not see below it.

Of course I could have saved him. I don't know why I didn't wade in and pull him out. I never hated him as Will did. I wouldn't have pushed him in deliberately, even if I'd had the chance. Perhaps I'd grown into the habit of passivity since being too scared to speak up that day on Cuthbert's Crag. Perhaps I just didn't fancy getting wet on a cold morning. I had a long walk back to the car. In any event, I turned away and left him to drown. Even now I don't have any

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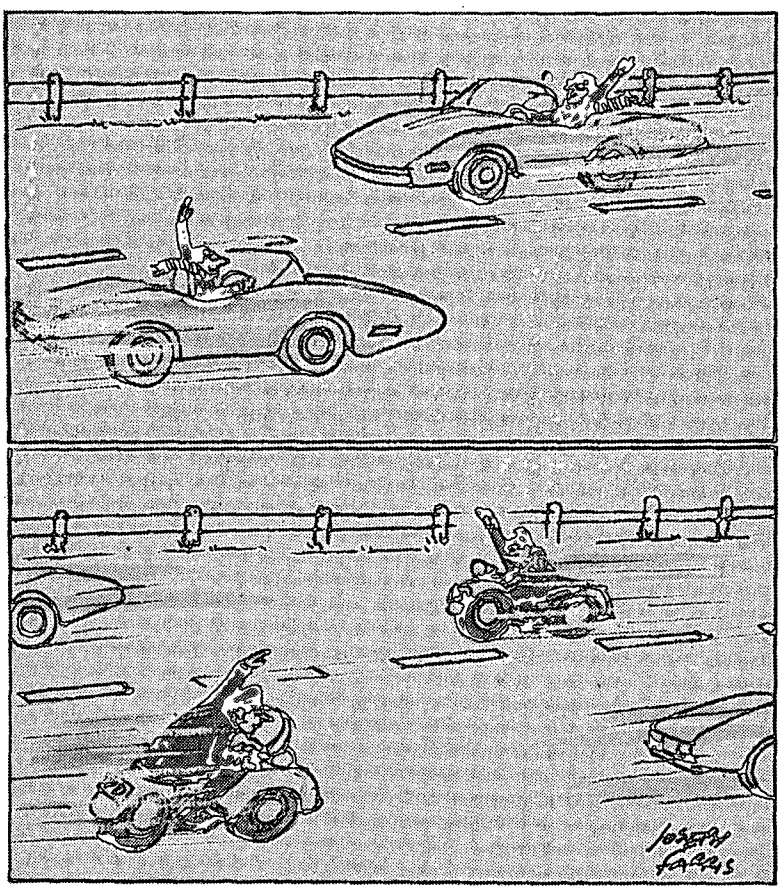
feelings about that either way. Not guilt or jubilation. It wasn't revenge on Will's behalf. Nothing like that.

A month after my visit to the house in North Shields there was an obituary to Dr. Stamp in a natural history magazine. It was embarrassed, understated, and I realised that I wasn't alone in my uncertain response to him. I wondered how many others had guessed at his egg stealing and why none of us had considered his activities sufficiently harmful to make a fuss. Perhaps we were all, in one sense, his boys. ○



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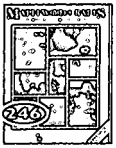

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Kate Charles appeared on the mystery scene less than three years ago with the novel A Drink of Deadly Wine, *published by Headline in the U.K. The book was subsequently published by Mysterious Press in the United States, which brought out her second novel in 1994 and has scheduled her latest mystery,* Appointment to Die, *for release later this year. The author debuts for us with a quiet and creepy short-short . . .*

SHEEP'S CLOTHING

by KATE CHARLES

A wolf in sheep's clothing—I suppose that's a fair description, though I don't really like to think of myself in those terms. One of my friends—one of the few people who know the truth about me—called me that once, and although it rankled, I have to acknowledge the accuracy of it. I may be a lot of things, but at least I try to be honest with myself.

Yes, it's true. I do pretend to be something other than what I am, and then I take advantage of people's innocent trust. To be fair, though, I'm not the only one doing it, but most people aren't honest enough to admit it. It's easy enough when you know how, and when you have good protective covering.

One of my biggest advantages is my appearance. I blend in well with my surroundings, if you know what I mean—just like the wolf I mentioned. I've reached the sort of age when women don't go around broadcasting how old they are—I think it's called "no longer young" by those inclined to euphemism. And I look ordinary, like anyone you'd pass in the street without a second thought. My clothes aren't showy or expensive—I buy them at chain stores like everyone else. Good old Marks & Spencers: where would I be without them? I'm afraid that I've put on rather a bit of weight in the last few years, but that all adds to the reassuringly ordinary appearance that I cultivate.

I meet most of my victims in church. Unsporting of me, perhaps, but I find that churchgoers are perhaps a bit more trusting than

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the average man or woman in the street. I fit in well in those surroundings—just another dumpy middle-aged woman amongst scores of dumpy middle-aged women. Does preying on church people (no pun intended!) make me more culpable somehow? That's another question, one I don't want to think about now.

You'll understand better if I give you an example of what I do. This is a true story—my last caper, if you'll allow me to call it that.

As usual, I met her in church. I'll call her Dorothy, for the sake of the story, though that's not her real name. She looked to be in her sixties, though she'd dyed her hair an unlikely colour, so it was hard to tell. The man she was with looked considerably older, small and wizened but well dressed. I was impressed by the way she treated him, guiding him with gentle firmness to a table in the church hall. It was a Tuesday, the day that this particular church—I'll call it St. Mark's—serves reasonably priced homemade lunches to most middle-aged and older parishioners, as well as any outsiders who happen to know about it. I've made it my business to know about this sort of thing, at St. Mark's and at other churches in town; it often provides my most fertile trawling ground for victims.

It was the easiest thing in the world to take a seat next to Dorothy at one of the long trestle tables in the church hall, and it was only natural that we should strike up a conversation. We talked about the food—how good it was, and what excellent value. It was shepherd's pie: I took that as a good omen. "Do you come here often?" I asked innocently.

"We haven't before, but we'll certainly come again," she told me. "It's wonderful to eat a nice hot meal that I haven't cooked myself, and it does Father a world of good to get out of the house. And me too, of course."

So he was her father—that sounded promising. "How old is your father?" I asked.

"He's ninety-two," she said, pride mingled with weariness in her voice. "He's very good for his age, I think."

I agreed. "Splendid, I should say."

"Though I'm afraid his hearing isn't so good." She raised her voice. "Is it, Dad?"

The old man, who had been intent on shovelling shepherd's pie into his mouth as fast as his creaky jaws would work, turned to his daughter. "What's that?"

"I said that your hearing wasn't good!"

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"No," he grunted, returning to his food. Better and better, I thought; all the more opportunity for getting to know the daughter without any interference from the old man. My antennae were twitching; Dorothy looked like she was going to be the ideal victim. She was a talker, and she didn't ask awkward questions. I couldn't have asked for more.

I didn't rush it, of course. That's where a lot of people in my line of work make their biggest mistake. By the end of that lunch I knew that I had hit pay dirt, but I was willing to take as much time as it needed to mine the ore from the seam.

That first day she told me a little about her circumstances: about how her mother had died, a few years ago, and about how she had moved back home to look after her father. "It's not that I mind looking after him," she confided. "After all, it's a matter of duty, isn't it? But I used to have a *life,* a life of my own. Now I'm just an unpaid nurse and servant."

"Your father has a large house, then?" I probed discreetly.

"Yes, quite large, but it's not *my* house, if you understand what I mean. Mother had some beautiful things, and I don't feel that it's my place to change anything."

I left it at that; there would be time to learn more as time went on.

The following Tuesday Dorothy seemed to be watching for me. She beckoned me to her table eagerly and resumed where she'd left off the week before. Believe me, I did nothing to discourage her confidences. "I love my father," she said, almost as if she were trying to convince herself. "Of course I do. But it's so difficult. Sometimes I feel so trapped." She looked off into the distance and added wistfully, "Sometimes I wish that a knight on a white charger would arrive and carry me away somewhere. Anywhere." Then she laughed in a self-conscious fashion. "I don't know why I'm telling you this. I hardly know you."

"Please feel free to tell me anything," I murmured reassuringly. "I'm a good listener."

As the weeks went by I was building a complete picture of the life that Dorothy and her father led—the grand house, the good furniture, the lovely ornaments, and the two lonely people, locked in a destructive relationship that made neither of them happy but from which there seemed to be no escape. Not until her father chose to die, anyway, and that might be a long while, given his good health and tenacity of spirit. It seemed as if I was the only person

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that Dorothy had to talk to; now it appeared that she looked forward to Tuesday lunchtime more for my accommodating ear than for the tasty hot meal and the opportunity to get out of the house. "No one else ever asks me how I am," she said one day. "It's as if I didn't exist, except as an adjunct to my father. I'm so grateful that you listen to me. It makes me feel like a real person, even if I don't have a real life anymore."

I didn't want her gratitude; it only made me feel guilty. I'm not totally heartless, you realise—in a funny way I had begun to care about Dorothy, even though I'd entered into the relationship with nothing but my personal gain in mind. Not that that was going to stop me from carrying out my plans.

So when the day came that she invited me to visit her at home—diffidently, looking off into space for fear that I would reject her offer, I was ecstatic, and had to struggle to hide the enthusiasm of my acceptance. Now I could really begin to make some progress.

I've been to her house once so far, and it's much as she described it. She *does* have beautiful things, and seeing her in her own surroundings brought her circumstances and her personality—and that of her father—so much more into focus for me. The visit was a success—she talked the whole time I was there, and invited me to return. I will, of course. For as many times as it takes me to get what I want.

I don't think it will take too long. Dorothy is so trusting, so willing to take me at face value as long as I'll let her talk. As I said earlier, when you know how, it's like taking candy from a baby. Of course it helps to have a well-guarded pen name. Dorothy knows me by my real name, the Christian name and surname bestowed on me by my parents and husband, respectively; there's nothing at all to connect me with Hildegard Hunter, the famous but reclusive novelist. And when my next book comes out, featuring a downtrodden spinster and her demanding father, Dorothy may find remarkable resonances with her own life, but I can guarantee that she won't suspect a thing. They never do. It's the perfect crime.

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a NEW short story by

SUZANNE JONES

Location plays an important role in Suzanne Jones's fiction. The Grand Lake of this story is real; Ms. Jones is masterful in marrying its beauty to an eerie sense of foreboding . . .

DEEP WATER DREAMS

by SUZANNE JONES

The depth of the water off the Halls' dock at Grand Lake is over 400 feet. No one knows how much over. Someone tried to measure it in the thirties and ran out of rope, and no one had much interest in it since then until the accident. They never recovered the body, though there is no doubt he did not surface. There were plenty of witnesses.

Apparently the chances of its recovery are remote, though they marked the spot where he disappeared with an ordinary fishing buoy. At the end of the following summer, someone removed it because of the complaints of the residents. It had floated as incongruously as a cheap Styrofoam cup in the midst of all that beauty and interfered with the races. They said.

The water is so very cold year-round in our high lake, they say bacteria does not act in the normal way in the decomposition process to produce the gases which would drive the corpse to the surface in warmer waters. So it is unlikely that he will ever be found.

I think of him sometimes down there and wonder if the coldness of the water preserves as well the faculties of reflection and imagination, not quite extinguished in the wet and heavy dark. If so, what does he dream of?

* * *

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Eric and I saw Gary for what we thought was the very first time at the beginning of the summer. Gary was standing on the end of the marina at the Grand Lake Yacht Club. Eric announced on the spot that he was already half in love with him.

Gary stood, arrested in the task of untangling sheets and sorting sails after the sailing class, looking out across the lake at one of the E scows coming about. He had the unconscious beauty of youth: the long, straight, slender back; well-muscled legs; and broad shoulders. He was wearing only bathing trunks, since he had just finished the first of the classes that he had agreed to instruct that summer. The sun touched the hairs on his arms and legs and turned them from red-gold to gold. His eyes—when he finally turned them on us—were widely spaced and a clear gray, not unlike Eric's own.

Gary was the grandson of the caretaker of a close friend of Eric's father, and thus came highly recommended to us. We now recalled that we had seen him about the club in summers past, often enough even to nod slightly. But he had changed greatly.

Though Gary taught a sailing class early in the mornings he would be free to help Eric the rest of the day and night. In the fall he had a scholarship to Brown.

It was not an ideal arrangement. I would have preferred having someone around full time, but men like Arthur, with whom we shared our lives, were very difficult to find.

Arthur loved Eric with the passion that some men reserve for other men and baseball. But Arthur broke his ankle at the beginning of that summer, and we had to leave him behind in New York. Arthur preferred to stay in New York anyway. He said he felt as if he were the only black man in western Colorado, which was not far from the truth. In Arthur's absence, therefore, we decided to take on one of the boys at the lake.

There are always boys there. In the summer, boys from the small towns around the lake drift to the marina at the yacht club to pick up the odd job. Arthur called them boat niggers, but of course they are as white as you or me.

The yacht club—not to give it airs—is a large old log building with all the ambiance of a warehouse. It was built around the turn of the century, and no one can remember why they made it so large. Perhaps to look grand from the water, which it does.

Eric turned his head and gave me a half smile.

"Well, do you think he'll do?"

His tone of voice did not require a response.

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Gary agreed to finish his task at the dock and help Eric to the car. God knows I was already tired of pushing him around, and the task of getting him back to, and into, the car was looming large ahead of me.

It's times like those that I wished I had insisted on a motorized chair, but both Eric and Arthur said he'd likely run himself through a glass door with it, or over a cliff, and they were probably right. Eric didn't have much control anymore, even over his hands.

Early one evening a few weeks later, I was putting on my makeup while Eric lay resting on the bed. We still share the same bed because that bedroom is the most comfortable in his father's house. That's the way I still think of it, though the old man has been dead now almost fifteen years. It was definitely Poppy's house. He was the one who had the walk built down to the house from the garage up on the road, not for himself, but for the old woman. Poppy kept his legs until the end, like a shrunken, bald old cricket, and died at the house on Long Island. He could have easily walked up and down that narrow dirt path we used to use, but it had become an ordeal for his wife. His wife, of whom I was not as fond, preceded him in death by five years.

They were a good five years. Our children were young, Eric still had his health and delighted in sailing us in the summers all over Grand Lake, and through the canal and under the bridge to the larger body of water: Shadow Mountain Reservoir. In those days the shores of the reservoir were marred only by the small cluster of inexpensive houses we called the swamp. Now the swamp has crept along the edge of the water like something foul but fecund, spreading itself over the cheapest land, bringing with it people who are quite unlike those of us who reside on Grand Lake in the summers.

But Grand Lake is much as it was. I am referring of course to the lake itself, not the town of Grand Lake, Colorado. The town has people who live there year-round like Gary's father, who supply our wood and fuel, people who clean and do repairs, and people who run the grocery store and the bars, and the souvenir shops. All the land surrounding the lake itself and the log and stone houses along its shore are meticulously maintained by the summer residents to keep the lake just as it has always been: a place of great and singular beauty. It is the highest natural lake in North America.

The mountains rise straight up from the surface of the lake. The steep slopes sweep from the water to timberline, dark with fir, spruce, and pine, and dotted with light green aspen. By the time we

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leave in the fall and shut down the house for the winter, the aspen groves will gleam like clusters of gold coins scattered through the dark green forest.

The evergreens on Poppy's property became so large and thick that periodically Eric had the ones in front of the dining room window cropped to preserve the view of the water. The Nelsons, who have the land next to Poppy's, cut down all the trees next to their house the summer before last. Old Mr. Nelson is afraid of fire. Eric was, of course, outraged and wondered if something could be done. But once the trees were down, evidently not.

Cut a tree now and then perhaps, but no one can build another house on the lake without permission, and that's not likely to be given by those of us who live there. There has been only one structure built on the lake since Poppy died and that was a guest house for the Sinclairs when theirs burned.

The master bedroom, which was Poppy's when he was alive, has its own bath (added in the forties at the insistence of Poppy's wife) and a mostly unobstructed view of the lake since it is in the corner of the second floor of the house, high above the boathouse and the water. It also has the only decent lighting over the dressing table, but it didn't seriously occur to either Eric or myself to change things. The house was comfortable enough for us, and our guests did not complain.

"Is it my imagination, or is it taking longer and longer for you to produce the same effect," Eric said. He frowned and looked at his watch. He hated being late.

He was right, of course, even if it was a little unchivalrous of him to say so. It did take a constant effort to look the way I looked. Eric likened it to trying to shore up a levee against an ever-rising river. He should know better than I, but then he was a decade older and had—being male—fewer weapons to fling into the face of disfiguring age.

"At least," I said, putting down my comb, knowing my hair would probably be blown about anyway in the breeze which usually came at that time of day, rippling the water in the dimming light so that the surface looked like pewter, "I do still look the same. Much the same, anyway. I'd hate to think all this was for nought."

"It isn't, darling," Eric said a little enviously. "You're still quite as lovely as the girl I married in—"

"Don't feel you have to put a year to it," I said.

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Eric smiled and pretended to adjust his black tie. He couldn't, of course. Gary had already helped Eric dress earlier, and I had heard a lot of giggling. Eric later claimed Gary had given him a massage.

Eric, however, was not the man I had married. Even his face, with its handsome profile, had begun to blur. But his hair was as dark and thick and vigorous as when he was a young man. Unfortunately he had inherited his hair and his constitution from his mother, not Poppy, as had our children, the poor things.

Randolph, our son, had been just healthy enough to enter the military, but not sturdy enough to withstand the rain of fire and steel in one of those small wars. He got a medal though, for dying well. He was such a remote little boy that his disappearance from our lives was a tragedy more contemplated than felt. Our daughter Jennifer died in childhood. We did miss her, often. She had the sweetness of the short-lived. Try as we might, we could not prolong her years. Poppy did not live to see the deaths of either of our children, which was just as well. He might have resented sharing with me the love he had hoarded in his narrow soul for his grandchildren. He never seemed to like Eric much, possibly because his wife so adored her only son.

And Eric had done as well as anyone (except perhaps Poppy) had expected him to do. He was handsome, a good dancer, and devoted a reasonable amount of his time to making money. There were things Eric knew about the market and leveraged buyouts that I never wished to know. Business was one area of his life that did not interest me.

There was a knock at the bedroom door. Gary had come to carry Eric to the little elevator on the stairs. He was, of course, going to the club dinner as well as we—he did instruct the children of the members—and looked very striking in his tuxedo.

Gary helped Eric into his evening jacket and placed him on the elevator. After he threw the switch, he turned to me and offered his arm, half-mockingly, as if aware of our markedly differing ages and stations, to take me down the stairs. At the end of the upstairs hall is a large mirror, and our images were reflected there: the tall, handsome boy, the slender blond woman on his arm. The light is poor in the upstairs hall, and we appeared almost the same age. We looked well together. I could see by the surprise in his eyes that he thought so too.

Then the elevator shut off, as it always did, with a loud clank, and we moved forward and down the stairs.

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There are moments in one's life that are turning points—not so much fulcrums as corners—and once they've been slipped around, however indifferently noted, one can never go back, and nothing is ever the same. I look back now and know that that brief moment in the upstairs hall was one of them.

Gary began to spend the time he did not spend with Eric, with me. If Eric was napping (which he did more and more) or content to read the paper for a while, Gary would seek me out. There was nothing untoward in his actions. He seemed to enjoy my company, seemed at ease around me, where before he had been a little stiff, awkward, and nervous.

I remember we were sitting together on the dock near the boathouse. I was reading in its shade. Eric was down for his nap after lunch. Gary was sitting bare-shouldered near me, but in the sun. He was mending a jib, the sail spread across his lap. His stitches were small, regular. I was very aware of the rise and fall of the needle in his strong fingers. Then something on the shore seemed to distract him, and he looked up. After a moment he reached across to me from where he was sitting, and put his hand against my throat. I didn't move.

"You always look so cool," he said. "I wanted to feel the pulse beating there."

I looked at him for what seemed like a long time, my blood beating against his hand. After a few moments he helped me up, and we went into the boathouse.

Though he had girlfriends, he was not an especially skilled lover. He did have the enthusiasm of youth, however, and I was quite infatuated with it and with him. "That buzz in the blood," as one of my jaded friends put it. He had only to come into the room to make my pulse pound. Just like all the old clichés. Repeat truth often enough, and I suppose it becomes tired and tiresome. But nonetheless, I found he quite took my breath away.

Eric did not fail to notice.

We had gotten up early one morning while Gary was still at the class. I had helped Eric to the little balcony off our bedroom and brought the coffee up myself and the cereal and cream. It took me three trips. I kept forgetting things.

It was late in the summer, and the morning was cool but not cold, so we were not uncomfortable sitting on the balcony in our robes, looking out on the dark blue surface of the lake. We could not see the white boats from the sailing class from where we sat. They were

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putting out from the marina at the yacht club, which was farther east, and our view in that direction was obstructed by the trees. Before us was the still water and the thin line of boathouses and docks across the way. The sun poured like honey over them and the shore opposite, but most of the lake was still in shadow. There was a lone fisherman making his way across the lake in a small boat with an outboard motor. Even over the distance we could hear the sound: a harsh stutter which skipped toward us like stones across the water.

Eric could manage his coffee with both hands, but the cereal was a little beyond him, not that he didn't try.

"Darling, can I do that for you? You're getting more on your pajamas than in your mouth."

Eric stared down at his pajama front in distaste.

"Yes, please," he said.

I began to spoon the cereal into his mouth as diligently as a mother bird. The milk and sugar mix ran down my wrist and spotted the silk sleeve. I frowned at it and inadvertently thrust the next spoonful against his chin, missing his mouth altogether.

"I miss Arthur," he said, peeved.

"I do too," I said, wiping his chin and persevering in my task.

We said nothing more until he shook his head, and I put the spoon back into his bowl and put the bowl back on the wrought-iron table.

He brushed the spilt cereal from his pajama top as best he could.

"You're quite taken with our young man, I perceive," he said.

Eric and I had been married a long time and weren't given to nervous silences or silly denials. Besides, it wasn't the first time we'd had such a conversation.

"Yes, I am."

"What do you intend doing about it?"

"You mean, more than I already have?"

"Yes," he said. "More than that. Have you plans?"

"Of course not," I said.

I got up and stood behind his chair. I put my arms around his neck, and he inclined his rough cheek to mine. He hadn't yet shaved.

"That's good, darling," he said. "I should very much miss you."

"I know."

As I kissed him, I was already wondering where Gary was, why he was late. Whom he was with.

That afternoon Gary took Eric out on the water. Eric hadn't been in a sailboat in years and was thrilled that Gary was willing to take

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him. Arthur never could have. He didn't know the bow from the tiller, whereas Gary was an expert. He had spent his childhood on the lake.

But I still didn't like it. The wind can come across the lake like a hammer, knocking down every boat on the water. I didn't like the thought of Eric in the water, even with a life preserver. The water was too cold. It seemed to me that much could go wrong.

But Eric insisted, my cautions were thrust aside, and I was rather pointedly not asked to accompany them. Maybe the risk was worth it because when Gary got Eric in the boat, Eric looked young and as happy as I've seen him in the past few years. He managed to wave to me cheekily as they put out.

Nothing happened that day or the next. Or the next. It began to be one of the routines of our life at the lake that after Eric's nap, Gary would take him sailing. Sometimes—but rarely—they would take me along. I'm not a particularly good sailor. At this point in my life I find the wind in my hair and the spray in my face more inconvenient than pleasurable.

Besides, I was busy preparing for Regatta Week, which was the last week of the summer sailing season. I had invited two couples from the East whom Eric and I knew very well, and there were things that had to be done or seen to. Rooms to be cleaned and provisions to be laid in, though we'd take most of our meals either at the club or at the new restaurant in the town. Arthur usually did most of our cooking and was far better at it than I was, but I could manage a breakfast or two.

In between all the errands and dashing about, I usually found time to spend with Gary—who sulked if I did not.

I suppose that I too was as happy as I had been in a long time. Eric commented on it slyly.

"The lake this summer has agreed with you, darling. You needn't spend so much time in front of your mirror."

If I say I was sometimes uneasy, I suppose that must now seem like hindsight. I do think I was uneasy, perhaps because it had been such a perfect summer, and I had lived long enough to mistrust perfection. The storms on the lake had been brief and infrequent, and almost every afternoon I watched Gary and Eric sweep across the lake in our old boat in perfect harmony with wind and water. Eric would return exhausted but exhilarated and chatter of Gary's skills until he fell asleep in my arms as contentedly as a child.

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One afternoon while Eric was at his nap, I asked, "Gary, why do you take Eric sailing?"

Gary stirred and sat up in a kind of sleepy daze. He fumbled for his clothes. After a moment he looked at me with those wide-spaced, guileless eyes.

"Why? Well, I like the old boy, and it pleases him. Reasons enough?"

I shook my head.

He sank back on the boat cushions and stared at the ceiling of the boathouse.

"I have dreams, you know, sometimes, of his weighing you down like an anchor, taking you to the bottom of the lake, and your mouth is open, and your eyes are open, but you're drowning, and I try and try, but I can't reach you."

The silence between us began, then spread like the crack in a sheet of ice when it separates itself from the main floe, growing wider and wider. I tried to think of a way to bridge it and to reach him, to make him understand, but he seemed to be drifting away from me in a fantasy of his own device.

"Gary, he's my husband. I'd never harm him."

He looked into my eyes. "I know."

He began to pull on his clothes.

"I've seen his body," he said. "He's old, withered. Thin as a stick. You're a beautiful woman shackled to a cripple."

He looked down at his own hard, flat belly.

I shook my head.

"I don't want you to take him sailing this afternoon or ever again," I said. "Promise me."

He moved so close to me that I could feel the heat of his body.

"What will you do for me," he asked, "if I promise?"

Then he smiled a smile of such innocence, of such sweetness, that I thought things might still be all right.

It was only later, after Gary had gone, when I awoke to the sound of Eric's chair thumping across the planking of the dock, that I realized I had believed what I had wanted to believe.

"I want to come," I said, scrambling into the bow as Gary lowered Eric into the stern.

"That's fine, darling," Eric said, "but it's going to be a little rough out there. Gary says we may get a real blow."

The sky to the west was already almost black, though the lake was still in sunlight.

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"We don't have to go at all," Gary said. He didn't look at me.

"Not that many days left," Eric said, looking about him, excited to be in the boat again. "We'll close the house soon. Let's enjoy this one. It's a fine wind. The wife can help push me about."

"As you wish," Gary said and shoved off.

I couldn't find a life belt. Gary took off his and tossed it to me. I was aware only of the slap of the waves against the hull and the spray that was wetting everyone. The wind was getting stronger and beginning to kick up whitecaps. We soon lost the sun.

Gary sat in the stern across from us. He seemed completely at ease, and as confident as I ever remembered him. Sailing was second nature to him.

The trouble should have come when we had to change directions and come about, and Eric had to be shifted from one side of the boat to the other. The wind was now so strong that we were all on the windward side of the boat as it heeled. But instead of turning into the wind, Gary eased off and put us on a run. The wind seemed to cease, but the waves were as high as ever. We were running before the wind. Very fast. Gary set the wing pole and pulled up the centerboard. We could have conversed normally in the boat had we wished, but no one said anything. Gary was jittery, Eric looked drawn and wan.

We were running close to the southern shore, coming near the Halls' when Gary announced that we were jibbing. He could have turned us into the wind, and I think I could have gotten Eric to the proper side, but Gary shoved the tiller hard over. The main sheet tore from his hands, and the boom came around like a scythe. I tried to get Eric down but only got in its way. It knocked both of us into the water as the boat went bow under and flipped end over end.

I remember the ringing in my ears and fighting my way to the surface. My shoulder was numb. The wind whipped the water into my eyes. I was choking. I grabbed the first thing in sight, which was the paddle from the bottom of the boat. The boat had turned turtle, the mast going straight down. Only the bottom of the hull was showing above the water.

"Oh, God!" It was Eric. His forehead was bleeding, but he was clinging to the hull with his poor clumsy hands with all the stubbornness bred into him by generations of men like Poppy. "Darling, are you all right?" he shouted over the wind. "Where's Gary?"

I didn't know. I worked my way cautiously around the stern of the boat. We were only a few hundred yards from shore, but it might

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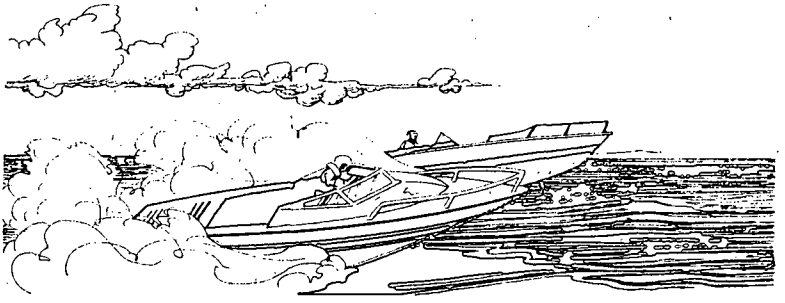
as well have been the moon. Through my tears I could see people there hurrying toward us along the Halls' dock. I was so cold I was afraid my hands couldn't keep their hold on the hull. My shoulder now hurt like hell. Why didn't the wind stop? It couldn't go on forever.

Gary wasn't on the other side of the boat. I made my way painfully back to Eric, and we clung together until they came to get us. It seemed to take forever to untangle Eric from the sheets and get us onto land. They never did find Gary. Even the divers couldn't find Gary.

The men who pulled us from the lake were puzzled by the accident. Gary was such a good sailor. Why he had tried to jibe in a wind like that was a mystery, especially with a man aboard who could not swim.

Eric takes less and less interest in things now. Gary's drowning seems to have hit him very hard. Arthur worries and shakes his head, and I am afraid that summer may have been Eric's last at the lake. Or anywhere else. I shall of course continue to come back. Every year.



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Raymond Steiber's work last appeared in EQMM *in January of 1988. He returns with a tale that may send a shiver up your spine if you've done your turn backpacking around the globe . . .*

MICAWBER

by RAYMOND STEIBER

Rutledge saw him every day on the terrace of the Florida Bar in Bangkok. A fat little Chinese in gold-rimmed eyeglasses and a neat business suit. After a while he even came to know his name. It was Mr. Wu.

Rutledge was down to his last few traveler's checks. In a week or two weeks, a month at the most, he would have to throw himself on the mercy of the American embassy and beg a passage back to the States, another leftover drifter who had waited too long to go home. He didn't want to go, but he didn't want to stay either. He simply wanted to go on drifting as he had for three years now, without either responsibility or the disabling illusion of hope. And so he sat on the terrace and drank bottled Thai beer and watched Mr. Wu.

Sometimes Mr. Wu was joined by a younger man. Rutledge had him pegged as a gofer, but a strangely indolent one. He would sit lounging for hours while Mr. Wu wrote copiously in an oblong notebook that fitted neatly in his inner coat pocket. Then Wu would address a few words to him and he would disappear into the crowds on the street and not return for hours or sometimes days.

Occasionally there was another man at Wu's table. A man with a pitted, anorexic face and long, stringy hair. Rutledge at first identified him as another gofer, but later he changed his mind. Perhaps he was some sort of business partner or maybe even a rival. Whoever he was, he had strangely disturbing eyes. Jaguar eyes. A predator's eyes.

Rutledge often speculated on the nature of Wu's business. Perhaps he owned one of the sex clubs that were one of Bangkok's main

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tourist attractions. Japanese businessmen flew in at group rates to partake of their pleasures, and others came from as far away as Amsterdam and London. He rather liked the idea of Wu in that role. Like most Chinese, he was probably a strict family man, and the contrast between that and his presumed source of income was too delicious not to savor.

Every once in a while, Mr. Wu would catch Rutledge looking at him. Far from being annoyed, he would smile and nod courteously. It was as if he were encouraging Rutledge's interest, as if he were using it as a kind of rope to bind them together.

One day as Rutledge entered the terrace from the street, Mr. Wu signalled to him.

"Won't you join me please? For a drink?"

Rutledge hesitated a moment, then shrugged and sat down. Mr. Wu motioned for the boy who worked the terrace.

"You are Mr. Rutledge, I believe."

"And you're Mr. Wu."

"You see, we already know each other."

The waiter brought a beer for Rutledge and something orange and fizzy for Mr. Wu.

"I see you often on the terrace," Mr. Wu said.

"I come here a lot in the afternoons."

"Ah, you are perhaps like Mr. Micawber."

Rutledge gave him a blank look.

"Mr. Micawber from Mr. Charles Dickens's *David Copperfield*. He was always waiting for something to turn up. Perhaps you, too, are waiting for something to turn up."

"Are you going to help it turn up, Mr. Wu?"

"I might do that. Yes. Let me ask a foolish question. In your passport photo are you clean-shaven or bearded?"

"Clean-shaven."

"Then you could be clean-shaven again."

"It would only take a visit to the barber."

"How would you like to take a trip?"

"What sort of trip?"

"Very nice trip. One way to Paris. Or return if you prefer."

"One way'd be fine."

"You shave off beard, dress in nice suit, new shoes. Carry suitcase. I supply suitcase."

"What would be in the suitcase?"

"Suitcase empty."

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"No rubies sewn in the lining? no tola bars of gold?"

"Mr. Rutledge, what do you take me for?"

"No plastic bags of narcotics?"

"Suitcase would be a trifle heavy. That's all. You're a big strong boy. You'd carry it very easy."

"What happens in France?"

"Custom man opens bag, looks through clothes, finds nothing."

"What if he sticks the suitcase in a metal detector?"

"Still finds nothing."

"Then what?"

"Check into hotel, leave bag in room, come back, maybe find a different bag."

"Just like the one I left behind?"

"No. Brand new. Expensive. Maybe find little surprise in pouch inside."

"What sort of surprise?"

"Five thousand dollars in American."

"I see." Rutledge sucked at his beer.

Mr. Wu's face got serious. His jokey manner disappeared. He leaned forward across the tabletop.

"Two days from now, if you sit on this terrace a taxicab will stop outside. Taxicab will take you to the place where you pick up bag, then take you to airport. You arrive in Paris Friday evening. Airports always crowded on Friday evening. Custom man in hurry. They look out for Orientals, but a clean-shaven American in a good suit? This weekend you could be five thousand dollars richer."

"I'd have to see the bag. I'd have to see that it was okay."

Mr. Wu shook his head. "Only see bag just before you go to the airport. Then you have sixty seconds to decide. That's all. We'll be very disappointed if you refuse."

How did he mean that? Rutledge wondered. Angry, vengeful? Or did he only mean that it would make them unhappy because they'd have to find someone else.

Mr. Wu tapped Rutledge's wrist with his forefinger. "Don't answer now. Your answer will be this—if a clean-shaven Mr. Rutledge shows up in the Florida Bar on Thursday afternoon before two o'clock, then we will know that he would like to carry bag. Okay?"

"What about the new shoes? the suit? All I've got's about what I have on now."

"Deliver in morning. If you decide not to carry bag, keep them. My compliments."

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Mr. Wu smiled at him. Then he rose to his feet, bowed slightly, and sauntered away down the street. Rutledge gazed after him until he was swallowed up by the crowd.

The suit and the new shoes arrived at his hotel just before noon the next day. He tried them on and saw the self he had been in the spotted mirror over the wardrobe. The young man who had drifted into Asia from Europe with Tracy and Roger and the German Hans. Roger had ended up in a Pakistani jail from which, pale and dysenteric, he had been rescued by the American consul and put on a plane for home. Tracy had eventually decided to leave too, but that had been in Delhi and at the last minute she had changed her mind and gone off on some hare-brained quest with Hans to Nepal. There had been other companions along the way, footloose and drifting Europeans and Americans, but these were the three he thought of now. The three who had known him before he had come to his present state.

He would carry the bag for Mr. Wu. He would carry it because it would allow him to continue to float—but in more civilized waters. If he went home, he would have to plug in again and he didn't think he could manage it.

On Thursday afternoon he sat on the terrace of the Florida Bar in his new clothes. A faint odor of cologne emanated from his freshly shaved cheeks. He looked out on the crowded street. He was in transit now. He was leaving all this behind. Already he felt a stranger to it. That dead-fish smell that clung to every corner of Southeast Asia, the smell he had tasted for so long that he had ceased even to notice it—well, he noticed it now. He noticed it as if it were his first encounter with it. That was what leaving did for you. That was how it alienated you from your surroundings.

A battered Korean-built taxicab elbowed its way along the street. He picked up the small duffel bag that contained everything he owned in the world and got to his feet and made his way to the curb. The driver was Mr. Wu's gofer, looking as indolent behind the wheel of the cab as he had lounging on the terrace. Rutledge climbed in the backseat.

The taxi took him to a part of town he hadn't seen before. A place of rotting warehouses and stagnant green canals. The taxi pulled up beside a dilapidated godown, its nose a few feet from the lip of a canal. An overfragrant odor rose up from the canal, and Rutledge realized that it was little more than a slow-moving open sewer.

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A moment later a metallic-green Mercedes bumped along the road and came to a stop a dozen yards away. All Rutledge could see of it was the trunk and a small portion of the rear window. He heard one of the car doors open, then he saw Mr. Wu. He appeared sweaty and nervous. He opened the trunk of the Mercedes and took out a brand-new suitcase and struggled with it across the road. Rutledge got out of the taxi.

Mr. Wu grinned at him. There was a film of sweat on his forehead. All at once Rutledge saw a face at the rear window of the Mercedes. A thin, anorexic face with jaguar eyes. He felt a sudden chill. We're all of us gofers, he thought. Me, the taxi driver, even Mr. Wu. And there's our master.

Rutledge took the suitcase from Mr. Wu. It didn't seem that heavy to him, but then Wu wasn't a very large man.

Mr. Wu wiped his forehead with a silk handkerchief.

"You're taking the suitcase? Yes?"

Rutledge shot another glance at the face in the Mercedes. Well, what did he expect? And in the end what did it matter?

"Yes, I'll take it."

Mr. Wu grinned. "Good. I'll be seeing you on the airplane. I'm going also. But please—you're not to talk to me."

"What are you? My nursemaid?"

Mr. Wu nodded enthusiastically. "Yes. Exactly. Nursemaid."

Rutledge opened the suitcase and arranged the contents of his duffel bag inside. Then he simply pitched the bag into the canal. It floated there like some new green form of aquatic life.

A moment later Mr. Wu was back in the Mercedes and Rutledge had resumed his seat in the taxicab. As the taxi pulled away, he shot one last look at the Mercedes. But there was a glare of sun off the rear window and he saw no more of his new master.

The big Air France jet flew west, following the sun and delaying the fall of night. The route was Karachi, then Athens, then Paris. Rutledge curled up in his seat and thought about the suitcase. It would be in the lining—and whatever it was, there wasn't much of it. So it wasn't gold and it wasn't dope either—unless it was a particularly expensive variety. What then? Thai rubies? How big a load of them would you have to smuggle to make a sufficient profit?

He put it all out of his mind. Later, when in moonlight the great mountains to the north came into sight, he remembered Tracy and Hans. Were they back home now or were they still wandering, sepa-

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rately or together, through Nepal and Bhutan and more exotic locales? He pictured them as he'd last seen them. Dirty, scruffy, Tracy with a rash she couldn't seem to get rid of. Offspring of the great European and American upper middle classes, rapidly spiraling—if his last look at them was any indication—into Third World beggardom.

The truth about them, and about himself as well, was that they were without any talent and without any will. Their exotic travels seemed by their very nature to imply a sense of purpose, but it was all an empty lie. They couldn't connect. They couldn't plug in. Mr. Wu had more will than they had, and he guessed that the man with the jaguar eyes had an almost frightening amount of it. A Nietzschean, fascist will that commanded obedience and obliterated slackers.

That was the kind of will he would've liked to have had. There was something to being a great criminal—if that was what the man with the jaguar eyes was. But it would be too great a change, and he didn't think he would like the process by which it was accomplished. It would be like shaking himself awake after a long slumber, like running five miles before breakfast, like finding out all over again about pain and discipline.

There was a long layover in Karachi. He left the plane to stretch his legs and on the way down the aisle he caught a glimpse of Wu. Their eyes met momentarily, then Wu looked away. The afternoons on the terrace of the Florida Bar had been forgotten. This was business now. But then it had always been business.

Two hours later the plane flew on to Athens. Most of the other passengers slept through that leg of the journey, but Rutledge was strangely tense. Not about the suitcase, but about the fact that he was leaving Asia. He couldn't wait for the plane to cross the imaginary line into Europe. He would have escaped them. He would have shrugged off the steamy clutch of the Third World and climbed up some invisible ladder to the First. It seemed, on reflection, as if it had been a close call, as if he had escaped beggardom on the streets of Bangkok or Delhi by the skin of his teeth. Asia had buried so many of his friends. There was no reason to think that it wouldn't bury him, too. He certainly wasn't any stronger than the others. He had simply had the good luck to meet Mr. Wu.

He stood in line in the customs hall in Paris. Mr. Wu was somewhere behind him, clutching a rather large two-suiter. The line moved

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slowly, and he remembered now the stories he'd heard about the Paris air terminals, about how tough they'd become, searching everything and requiring visas of everybody. He became aware of the suitcase in his hand the way you might suddenly become aware of a hidden marijuana cigarette at the approach of a policeman. It's there and I can't get rid of it, he thought. It's as if we own each other.

The line moved forward. There was a man in a suit and tie behind the customs inspector, and now he leaned forward and whispered something in the inspector's ear. A moment before he'd been looking at Rutledge—or had he? Maybe he'd been looking beyond him. Maybe he'd even been looking at Mr. Wu.

Rutledge felt his fingers slipping from the handle of the suitcase and gripped it more tightly. Whatever was in there was well hidden. They wouldn't have chanced Paris if it wasn't. He remembered the way the man with the jaguar eyes had peered at him from the back of the Mercedes. So coldly, it seemed. Like an alien intelligence looking out on a world of lesser beings. Surely that one would have figured everything.

He stepped up to the counter. It took an effort of will to lift up the bag and undo the latches. The first giveaway was when the customs inspector made no move to open it and look inside. The second was when the man in the suit and tie said, "Passport please," and said it in English. Rutledge suddenly felt as if he had lost control of his body. Yet his hand moved to the pocket of his jacket and brought out the passport and handed it across the counter.

The man opened the passport and examined it. Rutledge could hear himself breathe, hear it from inside his head, while outside there was a constant hiss like white noise. He thought: I'm not going to pass out, am I? What a stunt that would be.

The man snapped the passport shut. He said: "Come with me. Bring your bag." And Rutledge went.

He caught a brief glimpse of Mr. Wu behind him, looking studiously in another direction. He told himself: They won't find it. They won't find it. But he knew they would.

He was ushered into a small, windowless room. There were benches along each wall and a small Formica-topped table and nothing else.

The man said: "Wait here," and left him behind with his suitcase.

Break open the suitcase, he thought. Find where it is. Get rid of it. But then he realized that they must be watching and that that was exactly what they wanted him to do.

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He sat down on one of the benches. He was getting used to the idea that he was at the open end of a long entanglement with the law, that he'd be carried along now, *processed,* and that there was no way out.

Except the door, he thought. What if I just walk out? He stared at it and wondered just how far he could get. And then he had another thought, this one about whether the door was locked or not. Because if it *was* locked, then that would mean that he didn't have any more options. And he didn't think he could stand that. So he waited, and eventually the man came back.

Rutledge stood up.

"Your bag," the man said.

He handed it over. Now they had it, now he was free of it. The issue was decided.

The man left him alone again. He sat on the bench and wondered about French prisons. Well, at least they oughtn't to be as filthy as the ones in Pakistan.

Tracy and Hans lost somewhere in the Himalayas, Roger bundled on a plane for home with amoebic dysentery, and Rutledge in a French prison. It all made a kind of sense, he guessed, except that it was in Delhi or Bangkok that he should have ended up in prison. That was his appropriate fate.

The man came back for him and escorted him to a room down the hall. There was a metal desk in there, and a man in a leather jacket sat carelessly on the edge of it. He had the cocksure look that cops in TV shows have and maybe that was where he'd gotten it. But then, real cops sometimes have that look, too.

Rutledge could see the suitcase on the desk behind the man. They'd broken it apart and now half a dozen plastic bags of white powder were exposed. Rutledge stared at them in puzzlement. They're too small, he thought. And there's not enough of them.

They pushed him into a metal chair. The man in the leather jacket leaned forward and for a moment Rutledge thought that he was going to strike him.

"Where did you get this crap?" He used the French word *merde.*

Rutledge shook his head. "I never saw it before."

Now Leather Jacket did hit him. A short, crisp slap across the face. Rutledge's eyes stung and he was afraid that tears might begin to roll.

"Who were you carrying it for? Yourself?"

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The slap had stung more than Rutledge's face. "Some people in Bangkok," he blurted. "They asked me to carry the suitcase for them. I didn't know what was inside."

"What did they pay you?"

"A few hundred," he lied.

"A few hundred? For *this?*"

"I told you, I didn't know what it was. I thought, well, maybe rubies." Rubies sounded safe to him—safer anyway than what was in those bags.

"Who were you to deliver it to?"

"I was told to leave it in my hotel room. It'd be picked up while I was out to dinner or something. I wouldn't see who did it."

"What hotel?"

Rutledge gave the name, and the other man left the room to check on it.

Leather Jacket lit a cigarette. He questioned Rutledge about his identity and his previous itinerary. He demanded names and descriptions of everyone with whom he'd dealt in Bangkok. And Rutledge told him everything.

The first man returned. He held a brief whispered conversation in French with Leather Jacket. When it was done, Leather Jacket looked at Rutledge and sneered.

"You aren't expected at that hotel," he said. "You were never expected. You were carrying this crap for yourself."

Rutledge thought: It's some sort of trick. *But whose?*

Leather Jacket shook one of the bags in his face. "How much did you pay for this?"

Rutledge shook his head. "I didn't pay anything."

"Don't lie to me—you paid all right! I hope you spent every cent you had on this crap, my friend. Hocked your watch, hocked your friend's watch, anything you could lay your hands on. Because that would be exactly what you deserved."

"I don't understand."

"They gulled you, my friend. They ripped you off. They pulled a bait-and-switch act on you and all your sweat and lies have been for nothing."

"What's in those bags?"

Leather Jacket gave a short laugh. "Powdered milk," he said. "What did you think?"

Rutledge stared at him. All at once he remembered Mr. Wu struggling with the big two-suiter. *That was where it was.*

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Rutledge started to tell him about it. Then he saw the chasm that would open, the deadly pitfall for himself, and shut his mouth.

Leather Jacket got to his feet. "Get out," he said.

Rutledge blinked his eyes. "You mean leave?"

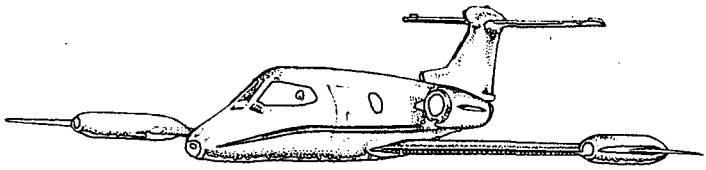
Leather Jacket put his face right in Rutledge's. He was shorter than Rutledge, but he was also a lot tougher and more intimidating. "What did you think I meant? It's not a crime to smuggle powdered milk into France, not yet anyway, so get out. But don't hang around Paris or maybe I'll change my mind, eh? Because I'd like to crush you, my friend. I'd like to turn you into bone meal. I'd like to turn *all* of you into bone meal."

They gave him a paper bag to bundle his clothes into and escorted him out into the main terminal. He had almost no money and no place to sleep that night. He thought about trying to find Wu and making him pay, but in this vast city where would he even start to look for him?

Jaguar Eyes had tipped the customs people, of course, tipped them all the way from Bangkok. He'd done it so that Rutledge could play the goat while Wu was the mule. In effect, Rutledge had run interference for them, tying up the opposition while Mr. Wu waltzed through customs into the end zone. It had been a hell of a gamble, but they'd brought it off and now they were richer by whatever the value of the contents of that two-suiter was—and Rutledge guessed that the value was a lot.

Rutledge stood irresolutely on the edge of the concourse. He didn't know what he was going to do about tonight or tomorrow or anything. When they'd first met, Wu had called him Micawber—but hadn't things, in the end, worked out for that gentleman, at least according to Dickens? Maybe he and Tracy and Hans and Roger were the new Micawbers, the kind for whom *nothing* worked out.

He picked up the paper bag that contained his belongings and headed for the darkness beyond the exit.



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As background to the following story, readers may like to know that in the Philadelphia court system in which this legal mystery is set, prospective jurors are interrogated individually by the judge, and, as a result, they do not have an opportunity during questioning to learn details of one another's lives. Author David Delman hails from Philadelphia; he is the author of many mystery novels and short stories . . .

NONE SO BLIND

by DAVID DELMAN

Though Henry felt Reardon's eyes on him he refused to be drawn into a contest. He didn't play that game anymore. He knew Reardon was attempting to bully him, but his experience with bullies was extensive enough so that he had long ago lost his fear of them. Actually, he had lost his fear of everything. Reardon could not be expected to grasp that, however.

Reardon, a large, redheaded man—two or three inches over six feet, 40 or so pounds over 200—was expensively dressed: a dark-blue pinstripe business suit, the jacket of which he had removed and draped carefully over his chair; blue and red striped tie, loosened; white shirt, cuffs rolled to reveal thick, suntanned wrists; well-shined black shoes. He was about thirty-five, handsome in a showy way. He looked like the linebacker turned sales executive he had announced himself to be. He also looked exactly the kind who is inevitably named foreman of whatever jury he happens to serve on. This jury seemed singularly content to have him in the post.

He did have leadership skills. He was organized and articulate. It was clear he felt the defendant was innocent and that the state's case was not only jerry-built, but ineffectually argued—by a callow assistant D.A. whose energy had gone into demonstrating superiority to the circumstances in which he currently found himself. In that at least—the quality of the prosecutor—Henry agreed with Reardon.

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By now the jury had been in session a little over two hours, long enough to affect attention spans. There was some newspaper reading going on, some sidebar chattering, some vacant gazing into space, even a game of solitaire.

Reardon was growing impatient—with Henry. Up to now he had been polite enough, all but deferential. But it was no more than marking time, Henry knew. In reality, the two men had been as instantly antipathetic as if they belonged to enemy species.

Though they were approximately the same age and height, the physical contrast between them was dramatic. Henry was thin—cadaverous was a word that had been usefully applied: dark hair, dark eyes, pronounced shadows under them. Also he had a deformity. His left hand was shriveled. He had been born that way. Despite this—or because of it—he too had rolled his sleeves to the wrist, creating an ongoing problem for most of the eyes in the room. He sat with his chair tipped back against the wall, seemingly half asleep.

Suddenly, Reardon's irritation leaped a giant step. "Costello? That your last name?"

"Yes," Henry said negligently.

"Spanish?"

"Probably. At some point."

"Anyway, Hispanic, right?" There was an emphasis, but faint enough to make challenge difficult, even if Henry had been disposed in that direction, which he wasn't.

"My great grandparents were born in Ireland," Henry said and now glanced up for a moment. "Were yours?"

"Hell, yeah. Of course they were."

"Just a couple of sons of Eire," Henry said, smiling.

Not pleased at this bracketing, Reardon stiffened in a way that caused his empaneled colleagues to go attentively still.

They were a group composed of eight men and four women. Of the women, one was black. All the men were white and, except for Henry and Reardon, over fifty. The black woman was in her sixties, the oldest of the group. The quiet in the room was a blend of expectation and visibly mounting anxiety.

Then Reardon's laugh defused the tension. He'd like to stomp me, Henry thought, but martyrs make life complicated for bullies. He's had that happen to him, Henry guessed, and recognizes bad strategy when he sees it. He'll hold his temper—if he can.

"Well, *Irish,* how about if we take a poll?" Reardon said, affability and acrimony in a nice tug of war.

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They did: eleven votes for acquittal, Henry dissenting.

From Reardon, this earned Henry a look he had no trouble categorizing. He had seen it often, initially the day his beautiful actress-mother had deposited him on his first playing field. She had then hurried off, eager as always to be where he was not.

As a child, Henry used to think he had been specifically created to be a victim: the bad arm, the beanpole frame, the distinct lack of anything resembling physical coordination. Relatively little about him had changed through the years. Henry knew he still gave the impression that a strong wind might blow him to Oz, while the thickness of his glasses proclaimed him a stereotype in good standing. Reardon's look had suggested long familiarity with Henry's breed. There was also a quality in it of predator spotting prey.

Skewing the equation, however, was the unknown factor—unknown to Reardon, that is. It involved a certain hit-and-run driver, the one who had snuffed out Mary Elizabeth's life. And Henry's life, for that matter. For seven months he'd been husband to a woman so gentle and loving that he would not have believed in the possibility of her—especially in relation to him—had he not experienced her. Seven months a husband, three months a prospective father, two years a widower. Reardon wasn't party to any of that, so he couldn't know that Henry was a burnt-out case. Burnt-out cases, by definition, have nothing to lose and thus can't be bullied. Poor Reardon. Fated to spin his wheels.

"All right, Irish," Reardon said, "talk. Spell it out for us."

"Is that really necessary?" a woman's voice asked.

She had been sitting, unobtrusively, across the table from Henry, her hands folded at the edge. *Early* sixties, stocky, not fat, skin very black. She wore a simple navy dress, well-cut, even stylish in a severely low-key way. Though her eyes were hidden by sunglasses, it seemed to Henry there was something clever in her face. He made a guess about her. She was a woman, he decided, who had become adept at the business of being understated.

"Is what necessary?" Reardon said after the moment it took to draw his glance from Henry and refocus it. "He owes us an explanation, doesn't he?"

"I meant your tone."

He studied her, then grinned. "A schoolteacher, right? I'll bet my next bonus that's what you are. Come on now, 'fess up. Am I right?"

"I don't see what relevance that has, Mr. Reardon."

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"A schoolteacher, sure she is," Reardon said, triumphant. His admirers were pleased at his acuity. It underscored their own—at having chosen to follow so insightful a leader.

"Teach, I don't mean to offend, but I honest-to-God wasn't talking to you. I was talking to Irish here, and the reason I was is it's my job to kind of goose things along. Maybe *you* don't mind spending the rest of your life in this garden spot"—a gesture to indicate their dour surroundings: glaring ceiling lights in a windowless room, dark brown walls in need of paint, a battered conference table strewn with the detritus of a couple of burdensome hours—"but the rest of us got places to go and better things to do with our time. That right, folks?"

The four who admired him most, positioned two on each side, formed a supportive Greek chorus.

"Right," he said. "So since there's only one obstacle in our path, it's up to the obstacle to make the next move. Okay, obstacle, you voted to convict because . . ."

"Because it seems clear to me that the young man's guilty," Henry said.

"Clear as mud. I appeal to you, Madam Schoolteacher. No pussyfooting, okay? Is it clear to you?"

"I'm afraid not," she said.

Chair once more tipped against the wall, Henry studied hands now folded in his lap.

Reardon's mouth tightened. "Look at him. Like he doesn't have a care in the world. Like it don't matter a bit how he's messing us all up. If you ask me, he doesn't think the kid's guilty of a damn thing. He just wants to jerk us around for a while. Why? Because it makes him feel important."

"I do think he's guilty of something," Henry said. "Murder in the first degree. And if in thinking that I am inconveniencing you, I beg your pardon."

"You beg our pardon," Reardon mimicked nastily. "The hell you do."

Henry examined his unhurt hand more carefully. Was that a hangnail about to burgeon?

"Damn it, you talk to us," Reardon said. "You shape up and talk to us *now*. You tell us what you see that we don't. I mean, we see a kid who never in his life has been in trouble with the law. You see a killer. What makes *you* so smart? You some kind of an Irish Sherlock Holmes?"

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"Mr. Reardon, I do wish you'd stop that," the black woman said. "Perhaps if you were a shade less antagonistic we'd all have a more productive time of it. Mr. Costello has a name. Why not use it? And my name, for your information, is Edna Taylor. You may call me Mrs. Taylor."

He grinned. "And if I don't behave, you'll send me to the principal's office? Hey, I once had a teacher—"

"I'm an investment banker," she said.

For just an instant he was taken aback, but he recovered smoothly. "Hoo, hoo," he said, playing to his audience. "You just never know where your next high-roller's coming from."

She turned to Henry. "Mr. Costello, I think you might help us here. Surely, after an eleven-one vote . . ."

He shrugged. "LeVar Berriman had the motive and the opportunity."

"His motive was money?"

Henry nodded.

"Do you say that because you're convinced he had a drug habit?"

"Yes. Aren't you?"

Before she could answer, Reardon said, "No *way* we're convinced. All right, he admitted that every now and then he snorts a little coke. Who doesn't? Whoops." He made a gesture in the air as if erasing something from an invisible blackboard. "Scratch that. But I mean, when you talk habit you're talking major league, and young Berriman denies the hell out of that. And didn't his big brother back him up?"

"I'm not sure," Mrs. Taylor said.

"Yeah, he did. He said there was never any coke in the house."

"As far as he knew, he said. In fact his testimony seemed to me deliberately vague at that point. But maybe not. Perhaps the reality is he simply doesn't know. And that's understandable. A blind man—even one as independent as Duane Berriman appears to be—might not have the opportunity to *know* a thing like that one way or the other." She turned to Henry again.

"I think he did know," he said.

"And that he lied to protect his brother?"

"Or for some other reason."

"Oh, for God's sake," Reardon said, "what other reason could there be? Either the guy was lying, or he was telling the truth. If he was lying then it had to be to protect his brother. Anyway, why does this have to become all that complicated? A dotty old dame got killed

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by the intruder. Everybody in the neighborhood knew she kept money and stuff in the house. Three witnesses said so. One of them actually heard Madam Nutsy tell a crowd in a bar she had five thousand dollars hidden in the attic. I *mean,* everywhere she went she was asking for it, wasn't she? Even Stevie Wonder said he couldn't get her to stop advertising."

In terms of oafishness, Henry would have rated this as merely moderate, so the reaction in the room took him by surprise—a charged silence accompanied by a concerted effort not to look at Mrs. Taylor. One of the Greek chorusters dropped a pencil to the floor. Henry noticed that after retrieving it she had surreptitiously moved a seat away. He saw slight but telling changes of expression and body language, evidence of a developing solidarity gap. Charisma—a transitory thing, he thought ironically.

Mrs. Taylor, however, seemed unaffected. Perhaps she held herself a bit more stiffly, but Henry couldn't be certain. And when she echoed, "Stevie Wonder?" she was smiling, her voice even, uninflected.

But for the first time Reardon appeared embarrassed. "Hey, I didn't mean anything by that. It's just that he's blind—"

"And black," Mrs. Taylor added helpfully, corroborating a detail.

"Well, yeah. Why's everybody looking at me that way? It's not like I called him— Hey, I always thought Stevie Wonder was a hero to you people."

Henry laughed.

All vestiges of embarrassment disappeared, and Reardon shot up from his chair, fists clenched. "What the hell's so funny?"

"You really are ignorant," Henry said.

"Ignorant? I'll give you ignorant. How about if I ignorantly bust your head, you skinny son of a bitch."

Mrs. Taylor rose and quick-marched to the door. "Mr. Reardon, I'm about to call in the bailiff and ask him to dismiss the jury. I'll tell him why, that you've been disruptive and abusive. I'm no lawyer, of course, but I do think that might place you in contempt of court."

"Big deal," Reardon said, but sat back down.

Mrs. Taylor took a deep breath. She shut her eyes for a moment, and when she opened them again it was evident she understood the shift that had taken place. It was she, not Reardon, who now held the room in fealty. She seemed prepared for the role, Henry thought.

"Mr. Costello," she said and waited for him to meet her glance. When he did, she touched the skin of her face. "This isn't suntan,

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you know. Thank you for your good intentions, but I've been what I am for sixty-plus years and need no one's help in coping."

"For crying out loud," Reardon said. "All I meant was—"

She turned to stare at him.

"Ah, the hell with it," he said and moved off to self-exile—the seat at the farthest end of the conference table.

She waited again, this time until she was sure attention could be diverted from Reardon. Then: "Mr. Costello, may I ask you to be frank with us?"

"Why not."

"I have the feeling you can't be swayed. Is that correct? I mean you intend to vote guilty no matter what the rest of us have to say to you?"

"My vote will remain guilty, yes."

"Then we're hung," Reardon said. "Might as well call in the bailiff now, tell him we're hung, and go on home."

"Is that what you want us to do, Mr. Costello?"

"What you do, what any of you do, is none of my affair."

Her gaze swept the room. "Still, I don't think we're quite ready to quit, are we?"

"Why the hell not?" Reardon demanded. "He just told us there's no point in going on. Ought to be a law against people like him."

Mrs. Taylor ignored him. "Are we?" she asked again.

She got support from six or seven, Reardon from none. He frowned ferociously, left Elba long enough to commandeer the playing cards, then returned to set out his own game of solitaire.

Mrs. Taylor made some notes on the yellow legal pad she had before her, but it was Henry's guess that they were meaningless. Delaying tactics. She was focused inward, he thought—looking for a way to get at him. Suddenly he was amused by her. Devious *and* tough, he decided. He'd have welcomed her at his shoulder in a boardroom fight. That is, when he was fighting boardroom fights.

"Mr. Costello, may I ask what you do for a living?"

"Nothing."

She raised an eyebrow.

"I seem to remember I was once a mathematician. Actually, I was research director for a small computer company. I owned some shares in it. I sold them. But all that was a very long time ago."

"How long ago?"

He kept silent.

She waited.

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"Two years," he said.

Her expression became thoughtful. "Something happened to you then, didn't it?" But before he could answer—not that he'd had any intention of doing so—she shook her head. "Forgive me. That was out of line." But she kept studying him. Not lost on Henry was the fact that, out of line or not, he was being given the opportunity to answer.

He didn't.

"At any rate," she said, "you've got a big job to do now. You have to convince eleven of us that we voted wrong. How are you going to do it?"

"I'm not."

"But aren't you obliged to?"

"I seldom do things because I'm obliged to."

She smiled. "Kings and ten-year-olds have that kind of luxury."

"LeVar Berriman's guilty. He put a pillow over his mother's face until she was dead because he needed money to support his habit. I voted to convict him for it. With all due respect, I see no obligation beyond that."

"Oh, of course you do."

"I won't argue ethics with you, Mrs. Taylor. Or even civics. In fact, I'd rather not argue anything with you."

"Because I'm so persuasive?"

"Exactly."

"Well, then, before we call in the bailiff, let me please persuade you to explain why you're the only one who's so sure LeVar Berriman's guilty."

"I may *not* be the only one."

She studied him for a moment. "Who else?"

"The invisible man," Reardon sneered. "Better yet, leprechauns. Irish here is so much smarter than the rest of us, he's figured out a way to communicate with the little people, and it's them that's gumming up the works." He rose, put a mock megaphone to his mouth, and shouted, "Listen up, you little people. Irish . . . excuse *me* . . . Mr. Costello can screw us without your help. Hey, Costello, where were you when reasonable doubt hit the light of day? Reasonable doubt? You know, the idea that you don't lock a guy in the slammer unless you're sure. Ah, I see the eyes flicker. It's coming back to you, right?"

"I have no reasonable doubt," Henry said mildly.

"You really don't?" Mrs. Taylor asked.

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"No." Pause. "Nor should you. Still, I understand why you do, of course."

"Sure you understand," Reardon said. "Hell, yes, you understand. And we understand, too. It's because you're smart and we're not."

"It's because you're whole, and I'm not."

Reardon glared at him. "Now what the hell does that mean?"

Henry glanced down at his hands—and then, suddenly, lifted the shriveled one into the air, exhibiting it like something detached, allowing them all to study it, forcing them to. Pinky and thumb were missing. The remaining fingers were shrunken, and the skin to the wrist was wrinkled and purplish. Gasps were audible. And yet, had they been asked later, most of them would have agreed with Mrs. Taylor, who described the hand as not really unsightly once one got used to it, just . . . so sadly diminished.

"It's always been interesting to me," Henry said after lowering his hand to his pocket—in effect, sheathing it, "that a physical handicap is seldom just that."

"Oh, for God's sake," Reardon said, "talk English."

Henry smiled. "I'll give it my best shot. I had a colleague once who was a deaf-mute. He claimed that caused people to make certain assumptions about him. I mean he could see very well, and he was quite bright, but it was surprising how often he had to demonstrate both capabilities in order to be believed."

"Duane?" Mrs. Taylor said. "Is that who you're really talking about?"

"In a way."

"What about Duane?" Reardon demanded. "He's not deaf, he's blind. What the hell's one thing got to do with the other?"

"Mrs. Berriman was killed shortly before midnight," Henry said. "The assistant D.A. asked Duane where he was around that time."

"He was in the basement listening to music. So what?"

"Question: Did you hear someone come in, Duane? Answer: Yes. Question: What else did you hear? Answer: Nothing." Henry kept his eyes on Mrs. Taylor to see how she would react.

It was Reardon who reacted—explosively. "And that's it? That's the testimony you think should send a man to jail, maybe for the rest of his life?"

Henry, glance still fixed on Mrs. Taylor, said, "The A.D.A. and Mr. Reardon share the mind-set I've been describing. Oh, how they rush to buy into the conventional wisdom. If you're a deaf-mute it follows that you can't see; if unsighted you can't hear. And in both

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cases you can't think—certainly not at Mr. Reardon's level. Or at the level of our young A.D.A. whose case was ready-made, only he couldn't be bothered to listen to his leading witness."

They were all staring at him now—Mrs. Taylor bemusedly, as if she had guessed what he was about to say next and was attempting beforehand to absorb it; Reardon with impotent fury. Clearly, he wanted to damage Henry even more than he already was but wasn't sure he'd been given sufficient pretext.

At that moment, however, Henry's platform was taken from him. The door opened, and the bailiff appeared, a beefy, red-faced man in his fifties with an expression given over to stagey joviality. "That's all, folks," he said. "Gather up your toys and things, time to go home."

The stares that had been fixed on Henry shifted to him. He liked that.

"We haven't reached a verdict yet," Mrs. Taylor said. But she spoke haltingly, for it was obvious to all that in some mysterious way their verdict had become irrelevant.

The bailiff grinned. "Yeah, but somebody has."

"I don't understand."

"Seems like last night Brother Duane took the law into his own hands, snuffed out Brother LeVar."

"Snuffed out?" Mrs. Taylor shuddered despite herself. "How?"

"Waited till the lad was asleep, then put a pillow over his head."

The silence that followed was not long, but was powerful enough to squeeze the room airless. Henry ended it. "I *wasn't* the only one, was I?" he said softly.

His glance at Reardon was bland but calculated to infuriate. Reardon opened his mouth, then shut it again on a muttered obscenity, on a string of them. He grabbed his coat from the chair. An instant later he disappeared.

The others followed at varying speeds. One or two looked back, but only one or two.

Now Henry and Mrs. Taylor were alone. She sat down heavily. After a moment she said, "Duane heard the murderer come in, but that was all. When he said he heard nothing else he meant it to be taken literally. He meant it to include the murderer's exit. But there was no exit. The murderer remained in the house. Why? Because he was LeVar and lived there. Is that it?"

Henry nodded.

"No other possible explanation?"

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"Duane couldn't think of one. Can you?"

"No." Pause. "If the A.D.A. had made that particular connection for us in his summation, I believe our vote would have been different, do you?"

"The A.D.A. is what he is."

"Why do you suppose Duane himself didn't try harder to make that connection for us? During testimony, I mean. He could have."

"Who knows."

"I think you do," Mrs. Taylor said. "I think we both do." She waited for him to speak. When he didn't she said, "Duane had his own agenda, didn't he?"

"Maybe."

Mrs. Taylor sighed. "The A.D.A. didn't listen. Neither did Reardon or the others, but I should have."

He kept silent.

"Oh yes," she said and then reached across to take his hurt hand between both of hers. She held it, like something valuable. He studied the tableau that made—the black hand cradling the purplish one.

She rose to collect her belongings and start for the door.

"Mrs. Taylor."

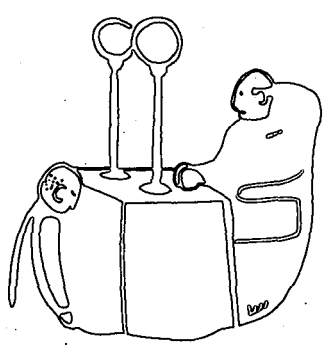
She stopped.

"Thanks."

"For what?"

"You didn't have to do that."

She smiled. "I seldom do things because I'm obliged to."



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a NEW short story by

GEORGE BAXT

After a long interval, author George Baxt returned last year to the series with which he began his career as a mystery writer, the New York-based police novels featuring detective Pharoah Love. The comeback novel of the series was an enormous success, making Newsweek*'s list of recommended summer reading. This March, Otto Penzler Books will be releasing another book in the series,* A Queer Kind of Umbrella. *For those who prefer Mr. Baxt's celebrity novels,* The Humphrey Bogart Murder Case *(St. Martin's Press) will also be out this spring, and* EQMM *will have more of the author's outrageously funny short stories. . . .*

PREMONITIONS

by GEORGE BAXT

The closet door was open and Bathsheba Rabinowitz examined herself in the floor-length mirror her husband had set in the door as a first-anniversary surprise. That was nine years ago, when he ran out of surprises. Bathsheba approved of herself in her starchy white nurse's uniform. She always approved of herself, because few others did. Her eyes moved to the wedding picture on the dresser. She recognized her groom, Attila the hungry, he who could demolish a huge plate of pasta followed by another large helping succeeded by two or three slabs of pie and didn't gain an ounce. She, on the other hand, was at least thirty pounds heavier, three pounds for each year of their marriage.

She puckered up her lips as she resumed studying herself in the mirror. A long time ago she had convinced herself mirrors lied, they added weight with the similar cruelty of movie and television

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cameras. Occasionally she dreamt of becoming anorexic, but hunger always overcame her rather dim fantasy. Would anyone meeting her now ever believe she had once looked like Princess Diana? Looking at her now what one saw was a reasonable facsimile of Roseanne Arnold. She closed the closet door while looking at her wrist watch. She had half an hour before her expected time at the nursing home where she worked five afternoons a week. Fairweather was a private nursing home owned and operated by Dr. Henry Pringle, who in his youth had fantasies of operatic glory, an ambition his mother didn't share with him. She wanted a doctor in the family and with brutal determination got one. Pringle shed no tears at her funeral, although he soon shed some inhibitions. He turned into a notorious womanizer and never married so he could be free to pursue his hobby with an unbecoming fever of lasciviousness.

Pringle had developed molestation to a fine art. Amazingly enough, no woman ever blew the whistle on him. Certainly none of the nurses in his employ, probably, thought Bathsheba, because he paid better salaries, much better salaries, than similar institutions. Bathsheba loved money. She worshiped money. Attila claimed she was born under the sign of the Dollar. She owned the apartment building in which she and Attila lived. It was a ten-unit building and provided a very handsome yearly income. Bathsheba kept the place spotless. When Attila lost his job the previous year, swept away in an epidemic of unemployment, Bathsheba, unlike other wives of unfortunate men, was delighted. Attila could be the building's full-time superintendent.

For a reason of his own, which he did not share with Bathsheba, Attila was content with his lot. He happily ate to his heart's content between pursuing mice, cockroaches, and Lily Ruth Semolian, a comely wench who lived in a studio apartment on the top floor. Lily Ruth, who claimed to be a tap dancer, actually was a bartender in a singles club in downtown Manhattan which catered mostly to Wall Street leftovers. One weekday afternoon when she and Attila were lying in bed clutching each other while watching Oprah Winfrey, Lily Ruth asked a question that had been bugging her ever since she had moved in two months ago. "Precious? Was Bathsheba fat when you married her?"

"Ten years ago she was a knockout. Very curvy. *Zoftig*. Boy was I nuts about her."

"So what happened?"

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"She started eating the way I eat. I don't put on an ounce of fat. Muscle yes, fat no. You should see the different sizes of nurse's uniforms hanging in her closet."

"Hasn't she ever tried to diet?"

"Ha! Once she would eat nothing but them frozen dinners that claim to be under three hundred calories each. So, since they were under three hundred calories, she'd eat three or four of them at a time. She gained another three pounds. It's her metabolism."

"This doc who owns the nursing homes . . . ?"

"Pringle?"

"Pringle. Right. Can't he help Bathsheba?"

"Nah. When he isn't looking after his oldies he's busy molesting the nurses. His plate's full, baby."

Lily Ruth untangled herself and sat up abruptly. "Do you suspect he's molested Bathsheba?"

"Hell no. I asked him straight out when I ran into him once in the Valhalla Bar and Grill. So right away he's very apologetic. I ask him what's he apologizing for? I ain't the jealous type. And he says he's apologizing for never making a pass at her. You see, he's no chubby chaser. Ha ha ha!"

"What's a chubby chaser?" she asked, now brushing her not too recently washed hair, fascinated by Oprah's guests, an incestuous brother and sister.

"You kidding me?"

"How could I? You know I got no sense of humor."

"Chubby chasers are men who like fatties. They go bananas for fat ladies, whether they sing or not."

"Oh! So you're a chubby chaser!"

"Like hell. What do you think I'm doing here in bed with you?"

"Oh, I think I sort of get it. I'm like a vacation, right?" She didn't give him a chance to reply. "Precious, do you suppose Bathsheba suspects what's going on between us?"

"Why should she?"

"Well, if she ain't getting any, she's got to suspect there's another woman in your life."

Attila sat up. "Who says she ain't getting any?" He defended himself hotly. "Every week, the Saturday night special. Three large pizzas, some take-out Chinese, a six-pack of beer, and then I whomp her into bed where we digest. You think I'm so cruel or stupid as not to keep her happy? Someday this building will be mine. It's worth a fortune."

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"You're so sure you're going to outlive her?"

"With the weight she's carrying, the odds have got to be in my favor." He looked at his wrist watch. "I'm dying for a banana split. Let's go to the ice-cream parlor on Atlantic Avenue where they give three big scoops."

"Do you think it's safe?"

"It's a mile away, why shouldn't it be safe?"

Lily Ruth stared out a window. "Do you suppose one of these days she might get a premonition about us?"

Attila gave her question some thought. Bathsheba was famous for her premonitions. As she explained it to Attila shortly before they were married, "Some people were born in a trunk. I was born with a caul. People born with a caul have the special gift of premonition. I had a premonition my mother and father would die of ptomaine poisoning and I would inherit my house, being an only child."

At the time Attila remembered asking, "Why didn't you warn your folks if you had this premonition?"

"I did, but they just laughed at me and kept eating the beef stroganoff I cooked for them."

Lily Ruth interrupted Attila. "Don't her premonitions frighten you?"

"I ain't afraid of nothing." Lily Ruth sneezed. "You ain't catching cold, are you?"

"I wouldn't be a bit surprised. There's never enough heat in this apartment."

"That's because you're on the top floor. It takes a long time for the heat to go from the basement to the top floor."

"Oh you! You always have an excuse for everything!"

In the Fairweather Nursing Home, Bathsheba was studying the chart of an octogenarian terminal case and clucking her tongue. She heard a yelp from Dr. Pringle's office and arose from her desk in her own small office, which adjoined Pringle's, and poked her head into the hall. She was in time to see a petite redhead who had recently joined the staff come running from Pringle's office while adjusting her cap. Pringle himself appeared rubbing his palms together, and when he saw Bathsheba glaring at him, he winked and with his usual smug look, born of a Boston upbringing, asked Bathsheba to join him in his office. A perennial optimist, Bathsheba hoped for the worst, which, if she was honest with herself, she knew

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would never occur. She brought the chart she'd been reading with her.

Once seated opposite Dr. Pringle's desk, she watched him pat back his somewhat disheveled hair as he said, "The new nurse is very quick on her feet. I wonder if she ever studied ballet. Whose chart you got there?"

"Mrs. Larrabee."

"She should be sinking rapidly by now."

Bathsheba sighed. "I've got a premonition she won't last the night."

Pringle smiled. "Your premonitions are infallible. Geraldo should hear about you."

"No, thank you. I prefer to keep a low profile."

"What about Mr. Holtz in Four-B?"

"What about him?"

"He's in terrible pain. Beyond help. Nothing works anymore."

"Hmmmmm," hmmm'd Bathsheba, "I'll see if I can work up a premonition."

"You can cause them to happen?"

"Every so often. In an emergency."

"Bathsheba, you're a treasure. Where are you going?"

Bathsheba had arisen. "It's time I saw to Mrs. Larrabee. You're sure there's no hope for her?"

"Not in the face of your premonition. I wouldn't defy one of those premonitions of yours ever." He studied her figure. "Bathsheba, I'm telling you again, watch your weight."

"Why? Is it doing something special?"

In the ice-cream parlor on Atlantic Avenue, Attila was cutting a swath through his third three-scoop banana split while Lily Ruth nursed a lemon phosphate between coughing and sniffling. Attila said with about as much concern as he could muster, "That cold sounds like it might be the flu. You better not go to the club tonight. You might infect some customers."

"Most of them are already infected if you want my opinion," she said matter-of-factly and then blew her nose.

"Your eyes are getting bloodshot."

"I always look a sight when I catch cold." She saw him signaling for another banana split. "Oh, precious, don't tell me you're going to eat another one of those humongous concoctions."

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"Don't talk fancy to me, Lily Ruth. I've told you a dozen times. You don't have to impress me that you read *Time* magazine."

At the other end of the store, Bathsheba's only close friend, Cassandra Coogan, was purchasing a candy bar while ogling Attila and Lily Ruth in their booth. She knew Attila couldn't see her because with one hand he was slurping up ice cream and the other was stroking Lily Ruth's hand. She believed her eyes though she didn't want to. Attila and that hussy from the top floor. Poor Bathsheba. The stars must be against her. Dr. Pringle doesn't molest her and now this, Attila two-timing Bathsheba with Lily Ruth Semolian, who was nothing but a bartender in a singles club. Cassandra had never been to a singles club, though she was a spinster and qualified. Her vividly lewd imagination conjured up all sorts of visions of what took place in the singles club. These visions made her pulse and her heartbeat accelerate, causing all sorts of hot flashes which only ice-cold compresses pressed tight against her throbbing temples could alleviate. That cough of Lily Ruth's was real ugly and Cassandra thought this health menace should be home in bed and not spreading her germs among the innocent. It was minutes since Cassandra had concluded her purchase but she didn't dare leave for fear of Attila and Lily Ruth spotting her. She picked up a magazine and became engrossed in an article on a woman in Greenland who had given birth to triplets, all three with two heads.

At the Fairweather Nursing Home, Bathsheba gave Mrs. Larrabee an injection while making loving cooing noises which Mrs. Larrabee didn't appreciate because she was comatose. Bathsheba cleaned the syringe with alcohol and placed it back on a tray on the patient's end table. She tiptoed out of the room, though she knew the precaution wasn't necessary. She made her way back to Dr. Pringle's office in time to see Tutta Benni, one of the nursing home's receptionists, come flying into the hall, her cheeks a blushing red. Bathsheba entered the office and sat down without an invitation. "One of these days, Henry," she cautioned in a low voice, "one of these girls is going to blow the whistle on you, and there might be a lot of trouble."

"I can handle it if it happens. It's their word against mine."

"Supposing you drive the girls to getting together and ganging up on you."

"In these trying times? Don't be ridiculous. I pay generously, you know that. It's enough to keep their mouths shut. What about Mrs. Larrabee?"

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"Like I said. My premonition. She's probably dead by now."

"Good. We need the bed." He gestured towards a ledger. "We've got a very impressive waiting list."

"Have you considered expanding? Buying the old mansion next door and building a connecting corridor?"

He gave the suggestion some thought. "It would mean doubling the staff."

"It could mean more than doubling your income. You could have some fancy suites constructed and charge a mint for them."

"You're certainly obsessed by the almighty dollar."

"Having a good head for making money is no obsession. It's a gift."

"Like your premonitions."

"Right on."

Back in Lily Ruth's apartment, Attila tucked the stricken bartender into bed and said with great ardor, "You look like hell."

"I feel awful. Please get me a glass of water. I'm going to take some more of those cold pills."

"You mustn't take too many. The druggist warned you."

"The label says you can take up to ten a day."

"That's to get you to buy more. When I get a cold, which ain't too often because I've got the constitution of an ox, Bathsheba don't let me take more than four in any twenty-four hour period."

"That's because she adores you." She sneezed. "Oh God, I feel awful." She reached for a tissue and blew her nose. "Are you going to make me get out of bed and get those pills myself, precious?"

In her office in the Fairweather Nursing Home, Bathsheba was talking on the phone to her friend Cassandra.

"You're sure you're not exaggerating?" asked Bathsheba, trying to control a growing hysteria.

"When have you known me to exaggerate?" asked Cassandra, now wondering, albeit too late, if she should have kept her mouth shut about seeing Attila and Lily Ruth, let alone telling Bathsheba that besides scarfing down banana splits he was stroking Lily Ruth's hand.

"You always exaggerate," said Bathsheba, her voice now hollow and sounding as though it was coming from an echo chamber.

Cassandra sat on a straight-backed chair at the wobbly desk on which her phone rested alongside an autographed photo of Brian

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Dennehy which she had sent for several years past. She sometimes wiped the glass cover clean of its lipstick stains. "Well anyway, she has one hell of a cold. And if they're all that tootsie-wootsie with each other then she could infect Attila and then it would spread to you and then . . ."

"You think it could be the start of an epidemic?" asked Bathsheba, her voice now shrill.

"You shouldn't be talking about starting things, you should be thinking about ending things." She paused. "Bathsheba?"

"What?" Gruffly.

"Are you mad at me?" Bathsheba said nothing because her eyes were tearing and she knew she was getting all choked up. "Bathsheba? You're my best friend and I can't stand the thought of your being hurt. Bathsheba? Say something!"

Bathsheba cleared her throat while she fought back the tears. "I'm not mad at you. I'd have to find out sooner or later. It's going on in my own house and they'd be bound to slip up. Neither one of them's a mental giant."

"You should dispossess Lily Ruth."

"Got no reason to. She pays her rent on the dot and she's quiet. She's a really good tenant." She almost added, ". . . And I'd hate to lose her . . ." but thought better of it.

"Bathsheba?" Cassandra was feeling uneasy. "What are you going to do?"

"Well, right now, I've got another one of my premonitions, which is my third today, and I really can't handle that many. Now you listen to me, Cassandra, you keep this to yourself!"

"Oh definitely, scout's honor," assured Cassandra.

"Don't you go blabbing it at the Laundromat!"

"You don't have to worry about that. I already did the laundry this morning."

"Just keep your mouth shut, get me?"

"Oh yes, dear Bathsheba. I'll call you later." After hanging up, Cassandra folded her hands in her lap and stared at Brian Dennehy. "Oh, Brian, my darling, something tells me you may be all I have left." Then she turned her thoughts back to singles clubs. If she could only muster the courage . . .

An hour later, Attila was in the basement working on the boiler to try to improve on the steam heat reaching Lily Ruth's apartment. His stomach was beginning to gurgle and he wondered if that last

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banana split had been a mistake. Bathsheba was climbing the stairs to the top floor, carrying a bowl of her famous chicken soup on a tray, which she carefully balanced. When she reached the top landing, she paused in front of Lily Ruth's door, listening with pleasure to the wracking cough that was agonizing the bartender. She tried the doorknob. The door opened.

Lily Ruth asked weakly, "Is that you, precious?" then stifled a gasp of surprise when she saw it was Bathsheba.

"I could hear you coughing when I was in the hall before so I figured you caught this cold and I brought you my special chicken soup."

"Oh," said Lily Ruth, "that's so nice of you." She sat up and Bathsheba placed the tray across her lap and then plumped up some pillows behind Lily Ruth to make her more comfortable. "It smells so delicious." She was spooning the soup greedily. "Oh, yummy. Mmmmmmmm."

"That's music to my ears," said Bathsheba. "Now you finish every last drop of it. You don't dare go to work with this awful cold that could develop into something fatal."

"I've already called in sick. Oh, this is such good soup."

Bathsheba smiled, pleased she hadn't lost her touch. Lily Ruth looked awful. Bloodshot eyes, red, running nose, sallow skin—not the beauty she normally was. Finally, the soup was consumed and Bathsheba took the tray and the bowl. Lily Ruth yawned.

"I feel so sleepy," said Lily Ruth as she snuggled under the covers.

"You just shut your eyes and get comfy in the arms of Morpheus," said Bathsheba as she left the room carefully shutting the door behind her. Back in her apartment, she could hear Attila pounding away in the basement. She carefully washed and dried the bowl and placed it where it belonged in the cupboard. The pounding in the basement had stopped and she could hear Attila ascending, probably to the top floor, she decided. She was right. He wanted to test Lily Ruth's radiators.

Once in her apartment, he said, "I think I've fixed the boiler." He felt a radiator. "There, it's good and hot now." He looked at Lily Ruth. She seemed to be asleep, but her chest wasn't rising and falling. He leaned his ear to her face. She wasn't breathing. "Lily! Lily!" He pried open an eyelid. The eye was lifeless. He hurried downstairs shouting for Bathsheba. Bathsheba was opening the door to the hall when Attila came flying through it. "Quick! Do something! I think Lily Ruth's dead!"

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"Dead? From a cold?"

"How'd you know she had a cold?"

"When I came home, I could hear her in the hallway. Such a terrible cough! I was going to go up soon to see if I could give her something. I better dial nine-one-one right away. Why are you clutching your stomach?"

"I've got pains. I ain't feeling so good."

"It's them banana splits!" cried Bathsheba.

Attila froze. He felt numb. Finally, he found his voice. "What banana splits?"

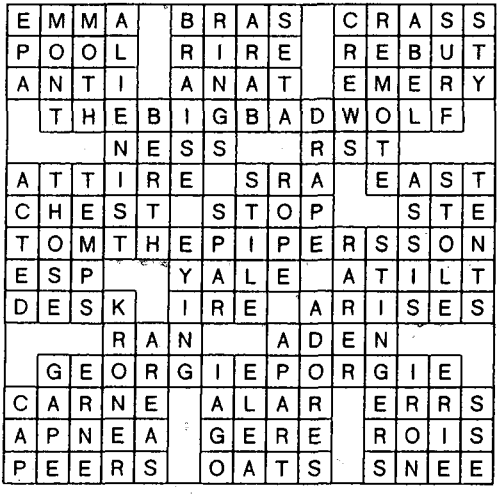
Bathsheba could have bitten her tongue in two, though she knew she'd have plenty left. She said bravely, "That place on Atlantic Avenue. Cassandra saw you there." She continued, brazening it out. "You shouldn't have let Lily Ruth leave the house with that awful cold. It's dangerous for the respiratory system. Come to think of it, that terrible cold of hers and that awful wracking cough might just have been pneumonia and that can often be fatal. Why are you looking at me like that?" She was finally dialing.

"Something funny."

"What's something funny?"

"All of a sudden, I think I've got a premonition."

SOLUTION TO THE MYSTERY CROSSWORD



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DETECTIVERSE

THE CASE OF THE DEAD RINGER

by CINDY RAMMING

It was a dark and stormy night, (okay, it was overcast),
A shot rang out (okay, the phone). I jumped up lightning fast.
The cordless beckoned as it rang . . . who knew where it'd been put?
My heartbeat quickened when I saw that the game was afoot!

I quickly searched from room to room, sniffing 'round for clues.
My husband looked suspicious in the kitchen, reading news.
But when I demanded he confess (with an accusatory tone),
He promptly made it clear to me he didn't have the phone.

"Forgive my accusation," I tried to recompense.
But that didn't stop this phoneless man from sharing his two cents,
As he promptly told me, smirking, that he really wondered whether
It's advisable to own a phone that hasn't got a tether!

Undaunted, I pressed onward to begin my search anew,
Trusting in my training to uncover every clue.
I carefully reviewed the scene and remembered what I ought:
Sometimes it's best to look for something where you think it's not.

So, logic told me everything required to crack this case:
I thus deduced the cordless must be cradled in its base!
Victorious, I retrieved it from its bed of restful slumber,
But the victory was short-lived when I heard, "Sorry, wrong number!"

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MINUTE MYSTERY

BOSS

by MICHAEL Z. LEWIN

Once only, on the way to the funeral, I stopped to look at my breath and wonder that it didn't freeze and fall to earth. But as I watched what I had exhaled I began to shiver beneath my thin coat and then I cursed myself for wasting time on such impractical considerations as frozen breath.

As I walked on I turned my curses toward my dead boss. "Cheapskate. Thatcherite. Exploiter." No sorrow for his demise but anger at the memory of his clench-fisted running of the company. And anger that my need for a job, even this job, was so great that I felt obliged to be seen grieving at the funeral and at the widow's afterwards.

If the dead man had paid me half what I was worth I would be driving to the funeral, or at least walking inside the skin of a warm coat.

"Dearly beloved," the cleric began, but that is what none of us from the company were. Nonetheless we cried, because no one, not even the managers, knew who would take the business reins, who was favoured in the widow's mind.

"He was so young!" I cried when there was a lull. Several heads turned my way and I was satisfied.

At her house the widow wore dark rings around her eyes. She welcomed everyone as we arrived, shook every hand. For just a moment I felt sad for her. It was not her fault that the dead man screwed every penny out of the factory that was his living and our existing.

Though I had not planned to do so, I said, "It is such a tragedy, but worse for you than anyone."

She said, "Thank you," but could not raise a smile.

But inside the house I grew angry again. Perhaps it was the widow's fault after all. The house she lived in, now owned, was as lavish as

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the factory was bare. No comfort spared, even the wallpaper was soft. She was the cause of our misery. The dead man drew our blood to transfuse her. No wonder her pampered grief was deep.

I ate what I could and then watched for ways to take home more. I stood aside to wait my chance. I hung in the shadow of velvet curtains. Having drawn the attention that would serve me, now I avoided eyes. It was a practised skill.

The tide turned. Having completed obeisances, it came time for company employees to leave the widow to her darkness.

From my shade I saw the widow thank each in turn for coming. But I was not the only employee who lingered. A man I knew only by name held back too, but the feast he planned was not the same as mine.

The widow turned to him. Her black grief broke and she smiled with bright warm relief. He winked. They thought they were alone.

Then the widow saw me in the velvet ripples. I had to leave, without food in my pocket.

But I was no longer angry, for was I not the only witness to a murder?

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a NEW short story by

DAVID DEAN

A Southerner by birth, David Dean has lived in New Jersey since he returned to the United States after a stint as a serviceman in Europe. Many of Mr. Dean's protagonists are policemen, which is easily explained by the fact that the author is himself an officer for a New Jersey resort town. The following story is more hard-boiled than anything we have seen from this author before, but it is thoroughly informed by his knowledge of how the criminal justice system works . . .

TRIAL BY FIRE

by DAVID DEAN

The tavern was nearly empty and I had just slammed my tumbler on the bar and was about to call for another when they walked in. The sight of them choked off my words. It was just past three in the afternoon and I was keeping my usual appointment with Jack, Jim, Hiram, and the rest of the gang. I had a pact with myself that I'd never start drinking until the rest of the working world did, even though I was no longer part of that scene, being prematurely retired. It helps to have some sort of structure to your life.

I recognized the other patrons as regulars, like myself. Of course, in a dive like this everyone's a regular. You wouldn't just walk in off the street into this place, you'd just keep walking. They count on people like me and they don't run tabs. That's why the couple snatched my attention away from that all-important follow-up shot. They weren't regulars here or anywhere else for long, I'd bet.

The man led the way, with the woman enough paces behind him to cover his back. I tend to notice little things like that, being an

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ex-cop. Usually, when a man and woman enter any establishment, they either walk side by side or the lady remains within touching distance of her escort. These two entered the joint like they were about to take it down. He walked hard and fast, making straight for the office in the rear, his trench coat swinging with his forceful gait, and sparing nary a glance for the losers at the bar. She, on the other hand, scanned the entire crew, almost walking backwards at one point, so as to include the door they had come in. A large woven bag was clutched to her ample bosom and seemed to contain something heavy that she was keeping close to hand.

The man was tall and powerfully built, with an acne-scarred face partially concealed by a short, dark, curly beard that matched his hair. He threw open the door to the office with his left hand while keeping the other concealed in his coat pocket, storming in as if he was late for an important meeting. The woman reached the doorway and stopped, swinging slowly around, the bag at the ready. My palms had gone wet and I had a death grip on the tumbler. We locked eyes across the expanse of the horseshoe-shaped bar and I think we both stopped breathing. She had the face of a fortyish hard drinker; pouchy and swollen, looking as if it were molded out of putty and about the same color. The eyes, peering out from the swollen lids, reminded me of green cat's-eye marbles, and showed about as much compassion. The mouth was wide and froglike. These attractive features were framed in bottle-blond, shoulder-length hair that had once been styled so artfully that she hadn't seen fit to touch it since. The eyes flickered like a snake's tongue and her hog nostrils distended. The right hand slipped into the bag. I began to reach around to the small of my back, feeling for the off-duty piece that I no longer carried. Murray, the barkeep, stepped into my field of view, his broad body like a curtain being rung down.

I stood up from the stool as he shoved a shot glass brimming with amber liquid in my direction. "Here's your second," he said. "You look like you could use it." With that, he scooped up some of my cash from the bar and sauntered over to the register. She was gone. The doorway was empty and dark. My image in the murky, fly-blown mirror behind the stacks of bottles looked like a resurrected floater with its shock-white face and drowned-looking hair and clothes. I wasn't used to allowing anything to intrude on my carefully guarded reality these days and the last thing I expected was to start thinking like a cop again. Thanks to the lovely couple, I'd caught myself unawares in the mirror and it was a sobering sight.

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Carefully, using both hands so as not to spill any, I lifted the tumbler from the bar and lowered my face to it. Years of waking with the shakes had perfected my technique.

I awoke the next morning with the usual cotton mouth and a vise grip loosely fitted to my skull. No headache, just the hovering threat of one. I've found that if I move right, that is, carefully and without sudden movements or bending over, I can escape undue punishment. It's a matter of practice. One false move, however, and the vise is tightened accordingly. I only had to get to three o'clock, though, and it was already eleven. Piece of cake.

These days I don't usually arise till elevenish. The shorter the day, the better. If I do wake up early, it's because of vivid, color-filled dreams and the pounding of my heart against my rib cage. Not a good way to start the day. What's worse is that I can never get back to sleep. That makes for a long day . . . which is a bad day. Today was starting off well.

I'd just settled down to a nice big breakfast of scrambled eggs, fried onions, Italian sausage, and A-1 when I remembered my couple from the bar. They never did come out again and I was there till last call. Actually, after a few more shots, I forgot about them. They must have had business with the owner, who's a fat Lithuanian with bad breath and an associate of mine from the old days. I'd like to say friend, but that would be stretching it. I probably bring back too many memories he'd rather forget. Nonetheless, he seems to have a kindly tolerance for me and that's good enough to keep me going back there. I can't afford to be too choosy these days.

It was funny that after all these years I should pick up on those two as bad guys. It wasn't as if I didn't see crime and scumbags by the tubful in this neighborhood, but since I'd turned in my badge, I hadn't once felt the need to do something about it. If I wasn't needed, so be it. John Q. was on his own. Even so, there was something about those two. I'd ask ol' nasty-breath about them tonight when I reported to the bar for roll call.

I didn't get to ask any questions of the Lithuanian that night and he wouldn't be answering any in the future. The bar was closed . . . permanently. When I strolled up it was just a smoking ruin wrapped with a bright yellow ribbon that stated "Crime Scene—Keep Out." I wouldn't even have recognized the place but for the bodega and check-cashing shops on either side.

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It was from Luis, who ran the bodega, that I got the lowdown. He said the place had gone up sometime shortly after closing and the Lithuanian with it. The building had been so fully engulfed by the time the fire department arrived that it was all they could do to keep it from spreading to adjacent buildings, and for this, Luis was eternally grateful. He had chased his family from their walk-up above the store into the street where they had watched the whole show. Arson investigators had arrived as the last of the flames were doused. I had already kind of figured on arson due to the crime-scene tape. I hadn't been a cop for nothing, I guess. The rest of it took me by surprise.

Just about the time Luis was given permission to return to his apartment, a body bag was brought out and deposited in the medical examiner's van. One of the uniforms on the scene, a local boy, told Luis that they believed the charred carcass to be the owner of the bar.

It hit me then. The couple from last night. The long, loving stare from the woman. She had recognized me. After thirteen years, I don't know how. I don't even recognize myself half the time. I'm twenty pounds heavier and a lot more grey and grizzled than the last time we saw each other. Of course, if I had been in her shoes, I would remember too. I was surprised she didn't kill me on the spot. She was sure as hell mulling it over.

Kathleen Vichter . . . dope-pusher, hold-up artist, and, the pièce de résistance, torture-murderess. Quite a resume for someone sent up for life at twenty-seven. She hadn't been so chunky then, or blond. Otherwise, she was still the essential Kathleen, brutal-looking and ugly. I should have made her right off and if it hadn't been for years of pickling my brains, I would have. A little late for Jogaila, though. That was the Lithuanian's name.

The man with Vichter was called Gunnar Bergstrom. I kid you not. He was the only Swedish thug I ever arrested. Actually, he was second or third generation and didn't look like the stereotypical Scandinavian, being dark and curly-haired. The beard was a new addition, as well as fifteen extra pounds of what looked like solid muscle. State prisons tend to have pretty good gyms and the prisoners have a lot of time to use them. The complexion wasn't cream-fed either, as I mentioned earlier. His face was so acne-scarred that it looked like someone had set it on fire and put it out with an ice pick. His disposition gave weight to that theory. So did his m.o.

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He was the one I should have thought of first, because arson was his calling card. Someone must have convinced him early in his career that fire destroys all evidence, because after his first stint in prison, at eighteen, he helped to justify half the fire department's manpower increases. Every crime scene, including a number of murder sites, was left smoldering rubble. Sherman would have loved him.

I guess the worst was when he set fire to an ex-partner of his over a business dispute. He, with Kathleen's able assistance, bound the hapless bastard with copper wire, squirted lighter fluid all over him, and lit him up. Where he wasn't scorched, he was cut to the bone by his efforts to escape the wire and flames. The pathetic part was that he lived for several days afterwards . . . begging to die. Actually, with no lips and blackened, cracked teeth, I couldn't make out what he said, but I'd bet it was something along those lines.

The dynamic duo had met up some two months before Gunnar dissolved his partnership and it was love at first sight. I don't know how they met, but they were never far apart from that time on. Their violence seemed to escalate from that point also. I guess they brought out the potential in each other, as happens in any good relationship.

What got them sent up wasn't murder of the partner, though. We knew they did it, but we couldn't prove it. It just got us looking extra hard at their activities. What got them put away is why I know they were the ones at the bar last night. It had to do with the Lithuanian. More to the point, his son.

Jogaila used to be the owner of a liquor store in this same neighborhood. Needless to say, it did a profitable business in this part of town, especially in pints and halfs. I ought to know, I was one of his most frequent customers. This was toward the end of my illustrious career with the police department.

Jogaila's mistake was that he let his first American-born son run the shop more and more frequently as he spent more time with his fellow immigrants at the Lithuanian-American Social Club. The Soviet Union was still going strong in those days and I think they spent a lot of energy trying to figure out ways to get relatives over to the States.

The son, Johnny Joggs, as he was known in the neighborhood, was as American as you could get. He couldn't have cared less about what was happening in Lithuania, Russia, or the next street over. He was twenty-one, healthy, good-looking, smart, and he had

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plans. He saw Pop's business as only the first step in a citywide chain of Jogaila and Son stores. They were making money hand over fist here and he didn't see any reason to stop at that. Like a lot of kids, he had big plans. Those plans, however, did not include making payoffs to local thugs for the privilege of running his own store. Unbeknownst to Pop, he stopped making the payments and hid the money in a lockbox in his room. The elder Jogaila had instructed his son in the making of payoffs as a natural course of business in the U.S. of A. Coming from the old country, he was only too happy to be allowed to make bucks on his own, and if that meant a small tax to the local warlord, he was glad to pay it. Well, maybe glad was too strong a word, and the tax was a little stiff, but when in Rome, etc. . . . In any case, the kid didn't buy it. He began to put aside a nest egg for future endeavors. Only for him, there would be no future.

Gunnar and Kathleen let him slide through about three payments. That's how they were making ends meet in those days, strong-arming for the big boys. They had made such a fearsome reputation for themselves with their Bonnie and Clyde act that the Mafia put them on retainer for collections and enforcement. Kind of like letting Dobermans patrol a meat locker in my opinion.

Anyone who knew anything about them paid up when they made their rounds. In fact, they probably threw in a few extra bucks for putting them to the trouble. Everybody but Johnny Joggs. Why he would try such a foolish thing, I can't figure. He grew up around here and knew the score as well as anybody. Like I said, he was a smart kid, except about this one thing.

Why the Bobsey Twins let him go for three payments I don't know either—though shortly before they waxed him, he came home one night with both eyes closed and missing two front teeth. He had also been thoroughly doused with the only good scotch they carried. That should have told him something. His statement to the cops was that he had been robbed by person or persons unknown. His assailants had not taken a thing from the till. That should have told him something too.

They could easily have drawn the balance of what he owed, plus some, from the register and been on their merry way. Johnny misunderstood them. They really didn't care if he paid or not. In fact, they probably hoped he wouldn't. That's why they left the money alone. They were leaving it to him to make things right or give them the opportunity to do what they really liked to do. They got

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paid either way, and fixing him would just be a bonus. Johnny must've thought his resistance actually put them off. Only a very young stud could think like that.

They didn't let the fourth time pass. When I got there he was a smoldering black mummy. The store itself had suffered minimal damage due to the sprinkler system, but it was too little, too late for Johnny Joggs. The elder Jogaila was being restrained outside the store by two poor uniformed saps and calling out to the heavens in his native tongue, but that didn't stop him from breaking free and taking a roundhouse swing at me. I ducked it easily and the uniforms drove him into the sidewalk. "You," he gasped in his heavy accent. "You do nothing to protect us! My boy! Give me back my boy!" Then he began to howl like a beaten dog as the tears streamed down his sooty face. It was hard not to feel sorry for him. He had played the game according to the rules but had failed to see to it that his son did likewise. Now he needed someone to blame. Cops always make easy targets.

When I stepped through the doorway, the stench was enough to gag a jackal. I popped open the nearest bottle to hand and poured some peppermint schnapps into my handkerchief and slapped it across my mouth and nose. The boy was worse than I expected. He was charred over seventy percent of his body and still smoking. What was left of his clothes was melted into his skin. The body itself was curled into the fetal position so common to burn deaths. The M.E.'s report stated later that he'd had both arms and legs broken prior to being set ablaze. All he could have done was scream, until the oxygen was sucked out of his lungs.

I knew right then that this was Gunnar and Kathleen's handiwork and that I was going to get them. No matter what, I was going to get them. Nobody deserved this. No matter how they played the game or bent the rules. Nobody should have to die like that. Nobody.

It only took me four weeks to nail them. It's funny how simple things can be once you make up your mind. I convinced Jogaila to take his name down from the door and go out of business. When it reopened a week later, yours truly was behind the counter.

It didn't take long. On their first visit, they explained the rules of the game and extracted fifty from the cash register as a sign of my good faith. They assured me that they would be back the following week. On their way out the door they helped themselves to a fifth of cheap vodka. Kathleen glanced back over her shoulder, smiled, and said, "Asshole." Gunnar stopped and turned to face me,

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waiting to see if I was stupid enough to respond in kind to his beloved. My palms were sweating and I could feel the blood draining from my face. I managed a sickly, simpering smile and nodded my head up and down like a puppet. They both laughed and walked out into the night.

Yeah, I was scared. Knowing what I knew about those two, I was plenty scared. But I was also mad. Madder than I had ever been. I had seen their work several times and now I had met them up close. Now I knew what it felt like to be toyed with by them. To be a victim. What scared me most though was a line of thought that had been going through my head during our little encounter.

I was thinking how easy it would be to kill the bastards. All I had to do was to let them get in the door for their next collection and cut 'em down like dogs. My report would read that they had attempted a strong-arm robbery and deadly force was required to protect my life. End of problem. But that wasn't me, not then. I believed in the system. Most of all, I wanted to kick over their rock and scoop them up, slimy and squirming for all the world to see, and deliver them to justice.

My partner walked in as I was mulling this over and informed me that the wire was good and he had been able to hear and, more importantly, record everything that had been said. He'd even managed to get a few good shots with the telephoto of them rummaging through the cash drawer. We were well on our way to a conviction.

The plan was to make the first couple of payments, then start stalling. I wanted to get their spiel on tape of what they would do if I stiffed them and their bosses. What I got was even better.

It was their fourth visit. They were both standing on the other side of the counter listening to me blubber about how bad business was, with Gunnar all stone-faced and crazy-eyed and Kathleen looking like she knew a good joke and was just busting to tell it. Then Gunnar made his big mistake.

He reached inside his fake snakeskin jacket and yanked something out and slammed it down on the counter. At the same time, Kathleen grabbed a good handful of my hair and pulled my face down to within inches of the object. She chuckled. She had a hoarse, boozy chortle that sounded like a guy in drag. I didn't resist. I knew that Gunnar was just hoping I'd take a swing at his little sweetums. Not a chance. I was too busy sweating and not breathing to do anything that constructive. I was also trying to figure out why I

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was looking at his wallet. Though I had to admit, it was a lot nicer than mine, being genuine hand-tooled leather.

With a flick of his wrist he snapped it open, and then I understood. It wasn't a wallet at all. It was his very own pocket-size, photo album and in pride of place was Johnny Joggs, almost as I had last seen him. The same scorched, ruined face with its lipless mouth stretching open in a scream that would never stop. The only difference was that he was still burning.

From somewhere far away I heard Kathleen's voice saying, "I took that, ya know, and it wasn't easy. Came out pretty good. I didn't even need a flash!" And they started to laugh. That was the joke she'd been dying to tell. I stopped thinking then.

With my left fist I straight-armed Gunnar in the solar plexus with everything I had. At the same moment, I clamped Kathleen's hand to my head with my right so that she couldn't step away. I heard Gunnar grunting and wheezing from someplace far off as I snatched her hand away from my head, bringing a clutch of hair with it and pulling her off-balance towards me. As she slammed into the edge of the counter, I let go with my right, drew back, and hit her with everything I had. Her head snapped back and her body began to follow her abrupt change of direction. She quick-stepped in reverse, colliding with a rack of whiskey bottles and went down in a cascade of amber liquid and shards of glass.

Gunnar's grunting had gotten louder, and he was beginning to snort in rage as he pushed up from the floor. I didn't waste a moment. Seizing the truncheon I kept under the counter, I vaulted over and struck him an overhand blow to his left shoulder, just where the muscle rises to meet the neck. I saw his left leg go wobbly. This time, without hurrying, I did the same to his right shoulder. Now the right side of his body went numb too, and he fell face forward. I stepped out of the way and let him fall . . . hard. His head bounced once and he was still. I straddled him like the Colossus of Rhodes and raised the club high over my head with both hands. I wanted to get this just right and then I'd see to the woman. I never even heard my back-up crashing through the door and shouting my name. It took three of them to get the club out of my hands. Kathleen and Gunnar left on separate stretchers.

I didn't see them again for nearly three months and then it was only for their sentencing. The D.A. had wimped out, as usual, and let their attorney go for a plea bargain. They would plead guilty to the murder of Johnny Joggs and accept—I especially liked that—ac-

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cept a life sentence, in exchange for the other charges being dropped. As the D.A. explained to me, the other charges were lesser ones, little things like extortion, arson, robbery, jaywalking, etc. . . . This would save the state the expense of a lengthy trial and the Jogailas the anguish. They never would have gotten the death sentence in any case. Not these days, not with this governor.

I didn't like it. We had a damn good case and I'm not so sure a jury would have been so lenient. But it was a done deal before I was even told about it. The last I saw of my lovebirds, they were being hustled out separate doors and bundled off to his and hers prisons upstate.

Now I was sitting in Captain Walter Dravidian's office, hat in hand, shaved, wearing my only suit, and sober. Though I admit to one little eye-opener in the A.M., just to steady me after my shocks of recent days.

I figured if anyone could, or would, give me an update on how my two lovebirds flew their respective coops, Walt would. We go back a few years and Walt had never turned his back on me. Even when I decided I hated everybody in the department and "retired," Walt would give me a call now and then just to see if I was still alive. We started out together in the academy and drew the same assignments a number of times over the years. He was the best cop I knew, besides myself, and went on to bigger and better things in his career. I went on to make Detective Sergeant and an early "service-related" medical retirement. Even that, I owed to Walt. If he hadn't pulled a few strings with his fellow brass, I'd have been out on my ass, no pension, no benies. Drunks with guns just didn't meet the department's new and improved image for the eighties. Good old Walt . . . nobody knew me like he did.

"So, you had yourself a little eye-opener before droppin' in, did ya?"

Like I said. Better than anyone.

"So what's so important that it actually brings you to stand next to a razor and attempt to look like a citizen again? Not that you succeeded, by the way. You look like someone I'd warn my grandkids about."

Did I also say that old Walt has a droll sense of humor and can be an unlikable son of a bitch? He'd never forgiven me for falling into the bottle. He'd once remarked that he'd always be my friend, but that didn't mean he had to like me.

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I cleared my throat and began, "Well, since we've decided to dispense with the pleasantries." I gave him one of my hurt looks. "I need a little information of the official type and since you're the only one in the department that still talks to me, or remembers me, for that matter, I thought I'd drop by."

Walt didn't answer, he just let it hang there, his eyes closed and arms crossed. I noticed that his desktop was as barren as ever. I used to wonder how he did that. Mine had always been awash in paper. I decided on a different tack.

"Of course, if you're too busy, I'd understand. I can see that you've got a lot of pressing business . . . coffee to be brewed, donuts to be ordered—and that's no easy task these days with all the new varieties they've come out with—a secretary to chase around, et cetera. . . . Is that why you keep your desktop cleared? I've always wondered."

One baleful eye had opened and was regarding me with some distaste.

"If this involves money passing from my hands to yours, forget it. I don't bankroll alcoholics."

I felt my face getting hot. I didn't like that word.

"No, it's not that," I choked out. "A phone call. An official phone call to the upstate wardens. I want to know the status of Gunnar Bergstrom and Kathleen Vichter."

Now both eyes were open.

"Their status is that they're both in the slammer for life. You know that. We put them there."

If I didn't mention it before, Walt was my partner on the liquor-store setup. Remember? The one who took pictures and stayed clean. Dapper Walt.

"I saw them the other night. At Jogaila's place. You know, the dive that got torched the other night?" I could see that I had his interest now.

"You saw them?" he asked levelly.

"At Jogaila's place," I repeated. "Think the department might be interested? You've got motive. Old Jogaila helped set them up. You've got means, that goes without saying with their track record. And you've got opportunity. I can place them at the scene," I finished smugly.

Walt took a long pause before answering. "Had you been drinking?"

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I felt my face getting hot again. "What do you think, Walt? It was a freakin' bar." I could see where this was going, fast. "I'd had my first of the day, for chrissake! One!" I shouted louder than I had meant to.

Walt was sitting upright now and carefully ignoring the fleck of spittle that had landed on his pressed pinstripe. He picked up the phone and spoke quietly to his invisible secretary. After a few instructions, he hung up. We sat there looking at each other. To break the tension, I helped myself to a mug of his gourmet coffee since he wasn't going to offer any. I felt like a steel rod had replaced my vertebrae. My hands were shaking as I stirred in my third sugar. The phone rang and I spilled some onto his cream-colored carpet.

I came and stood over his desk while he had another of his infuriating whispered conversations. "Yes . . . Yes . . . I see." Long pause. "Yes. Thank you." He gently replaced the receiver.

I stood over him, waiting. He continued looking at the phone. I was getting damn sick of his long pauses.

"Where are they?" I asked at last.

He looked up as if he had just noticed me standing there.

"They're in prison. Just where we left them," he replied quietly. "No parole, no special privileges. Life."

My legs were shaking and I had to set the mug down on his immaculate desk even though I knew it would leave a ring.

"You didn't even speak to them. How can you be sure?" I could hear how lame I sounded.

"That wasn't necessary. My secretary spoke to the wardens of both prisons. I don't think they would lie about it . . . do you?"

I didn't care for the tone of that question. It sounded like a reality check.

"Walt, I saw them. They've changed, sure. Who wouldn't after thirteen years? It was them, Walt! I'd bet my life on it!" I was backing towards the door. The office felt close, stifling.

Walt was standing now. I'd about forgotten he could do that. Through the roaring in my ears, I could just make out fragments of what he was saying. Words like treatment, help, drinking problem. He looked pale and stricken, human at last. My friend was calling my name as I slammed the door to his office and fled the building.

If there's anything worse than a useless drunk, it's a drunk who thinks he's useful. My ears burn when I think of myself in Walt's office. I know what I must have looked like. A burned-out, used-up

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alcoholic—there, I've said it—ex-cop attempting to worm his way back into the fold with tales of bad guys from his heyday. Unverifiable, unsupported tales. Hallucinations. It must have been pretty sickening for Walt. "Think the department would be interested?" It made me want to vomit with humiliation.

What was even worse was that now I wasn't sure. About anything. If that wasn't Vichter and Bergstrom I'd seen in Jogaila's, then I was further gone than I'd ever realized. I was lost . . . seeing ghosts. You'd think that if God was merciful, I'd have been visited by shades of lovers past. Like that full-breasted Italian beauty that used to make such a fuss about me so many years ago. Instead, I got the couple most likely to burn in hell. Actually, the couple most likely to burn . . . period! Har, har, I kill myself! What a sense of humor! And humor is important to the drinking man. Without it you might go insane.

I decided to raise a toast to myself and my ghosts and let the devil take the hindmost. When you're surrounded by friends like Jim and Hiram you've no need to fear phantoms. Even they cannot follow you into oblivion. With my friends' able assistance I'd become a ghost myself and wander these vaguely familiar streets. Maybe I'd bump into someone who remembered me and I'd haunt them instead!

On the third day, I rose again. I had no idea where I'd been or who I'd been with. I was reasonably certain that I'd been rolled, as my ribs were sore as hell and my cash gone—even the reserve I kept in my left shoe. The shoe was gone too.

I woke up in a doorway that smelled of urine, covered with newspapers. The sun was still below the horizon. In the grey, murky light of a tenement dawn, I lay among the trash and wondered if I was human anymore. I couldn't even picture my own face.

A sooty breeze fluttered the papers that covered me and I rolled over to my stomach and forced myself up onto all fours. Even that effort had drops of sour sweat trickling down my face and armpits. It seemed important to get on my hind legs if I was ever going to resume human form again.

After dry-heaving a few times from the exertion, I managed to pull myself up using the security bars that covered the door. I stood there, holding on and praying that I wouldn't faint from the throbbing inside my skull. After a few moments, it subsided enough for me to take stock of my surroundings. I recognized the street. It

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would appear that I had missed finding my own doorway by only three blocks.

I tossed my remaining shoe into the gutter. What good could it do me now? In my tattered stockinged feet I trudged towards sanctuary like a pilgrim in Palestine.

Eventually, I arrived within sight of my building, my feet cut and bleeding. I guessed it was a Sunday morning as the streets were still deserted when I approached my familiar doorway and leaned against a friendly wall to catch my breath. It was then that I smelled it. Burning death. It was coming from the doorway of my building.

Sweat started pouring from my body and my legs got so wobbly I started to slide down the wall. I think I might have whimpered a little. I didn't want to look into that doorway. I didn't want to see. But I was also terrified that nothing would be there and that I really was losing my mind. I had to find out.

I peeked around the doorframe into the shadowy interior. The sweetish smell of burnt flesh was overpowering. Its source lay just inside the cramped foyer on the cracked, dirty tiles: a curled, blackened fetus of a man, shrunken by the flames that had consumed all recognizable humanity. A bottle of Mad Dog lay just beyond his reach. A bum in a doorway, just like I had been. Only he had picked the wrong doorway. I felt myself weeping.

The tiles of the floor and walls were scorched, as was the interior metal door. The fire must have been intense but brief and exhausted itself quickly with nothing else to feed on. My fellow tenants had been lucky. They probably never heard a thing. This poor bastard never knew what hit him. By the time the flames roused him from his stupor, he wouldn't have had enough oxygen to scream. The pity is that he was just a substitute.

I stepped over him and pushed open the inner door. I could see the pry marks near the latch, just where I expected them. There was nothing to fear now, Kathleen and Gunnar had gone. They'd just left me their calling card in the foyer.

My room on the third floor had been similarly jimmied. They hadn't really bothered anything. They had just taken a quick look around to make sure I wasn't there and left. There was the faint smell of an accelerant in the air. They had come prepared, of course. Finding the wino in the foyer on their way out must have been irresistible. They would fight back. First Jogaila, then me. Simple. Revenge.

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I threw my shaving kit, some clean clothes, my checkbook, credit cards, and a few other odds and ends that I thought I might need into a flight bag and split for the YMCA to get cleaned up. I left my friends Jim and Hiram behind. I wasn't going back.

I laid low for a few days, drying out and thinking about what I knew. Which wasn't much. First, Gunnar Bergstrom and Kathleen Vichter. I knew with absolute certainty that I'd seen them, booze or no booze. And for now, it was no booze. Second, the time of the first murder—the wee hours of a Saturday morning. I had spotted them coming into the bar on a Friday afternoon. After normal work hours. The murder of the wino had been accomplished in the small hours of a Sunday morning. Both killings had been on a weekend, a week apart. Third, they were after me. Not really a lot to go on, so I theorized.

My theory was this: They were coming here from somewhere else. Too many people remembered them around this town, on both sides of the law. None of them had much reason to be friendly. The mob wasn't too happy with them for pleading to the Johnny Joggs murder and causing the uproar that ensued about cleaning up the city. A lot of wiseguys had had to go underground and a lot of business was lost as a result. I'd heard that the feds were having a field day right around the time I left the force.

So now I was testing my theory by sitting on the rooftop of a factory building that was across the street and two doors down from my old address. It was closed on the weekends and they had no security. I just wheezed my way up the rear fire escape and set up camp with an old lawn chair and a thermos of coffee. Occasionally, I scanned the street with a set of binoculars that I never turned back in to the department.

I figured they'd come at night. Even the gruesome twosome had to exercise some discretion. So I was just waiting and watching. Since I'd quit drinking—this was my seventh day—I didn't sleep anyway. Maybe two, three hours a night.

I'd done something with my appearance too, though not what you might think. I'd grown myself a pretty full beard. It was a little on the grizzled side, but not bad. Along with the horn-rimmed reading glasses I'd picked up at the pharmacy and a decent-looking suit, I came off as almost professional. I'd even sprung for a nice leather attaché case to complete the picture. A professor of criminology, specializing in arson murders.

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* * *

The sound of the car's idling engine gradually worked its way down into my consciousness and a tiny alarm went off. I woke with a snort and leaned cautiously forward over the parapet of the rooftop. I didn't know how long I had been dozing. My watch showed four A.M., Monday. The street was completely deserted. The only sound came from a late-model Chevy four-door that stood idling with its lights off near the corner. It almost looked like an unmarked, but there were no telltale antennas.

I fumbled the binocs up to my eyes and adjusted them. I couldn't see anything inside the darkened automobile. Suddenly, there was silence as they killed the engine. Still nothing happened. Even from where I was I could hear the clicking of the cooling engine.

Both doors flew open and they stepped out. The interior light never came on. They had unscrewed the bulb. Very professional. They eased the doors shut and began to walk away from the car. A man and a woman. I had to wait for them to reach a light before I could get a good look. I was wrong. It wasn't a man and a woman. It was Gunnar and Kathleen.

I waited until they entered my building. Kathleen's throaty, clotted cackle wafted up to me as they crossed the charred foyer. Past pleasures remembered, I guess. When I heard the soft pop of the new lock being forced, I dashed for the fire escape.

My breath was coming in gasps by the time I reached their car. Gulping air, I gave it the once-over. Clean, impersonal. The glove box yielded a registration and a rental agreement. The registration showed that the car belonged to one of the rental agencies at the airport. The lease papers identified a Mr. and Mrs. Charles Schlosser of Cleveland as the lessees. Right. I came up for air and glanced at the window of my apartment. The lights came on.

It wouldn't take a moment for them to determine I wasn't at home. With my palms sweating so that I could hardly hold the pen, I scribbled down the information, including the make and model of the car and the plate numbers. I looked up again. I could see their shadows on the ceiling crisscrossing one another. One detached itself and reached out towards the window. It quickly foreshortened as its owner approached. Suddenly Kathleen was there looking out into the night. With one move, I swung my legs into the car and pulled the door closed. Lying across the front seat, I could still see her through the windshield. She pressed her face to the glass, cupping her hands around her eyes, and looked directly at the car. I prayed

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I wasn't visible by the streetlight. After a long moment, she stepped away. The shadow dance resumed on the ceiling.

They would be on their way out any second. I sprang from the car, eased the door shut, and melted into the darkness of the storefronts. If they couldn't hear my heart pounding up on the third floor, they were deaf. I hurried around the corner to find a useable pay phone. My theory having been proved, I now had to put a plan into action. Phase one was to dial 911, like any concerned citizen. Then a dash for the airport.

After giving the dispatcher a story about arsonists at my old address, I made sure he had a good description of Gunnar and Kathleen, as well as their car. At the very least, after the murder of the wino, I knew a patrol unit would respond. If Kathleen and Gunnar had any alternate plans, like last time, I hoped the appearance of the cops would discourage them. At best, they'd be caught with their pants down and arrested for conspiracy to commit arson, and fingerprint comparisons after booking would hopefully do the rest. The mystery of how they waltzed out of prison every weekend would get solved when their actual identities became evident. To hedge my bets, I beat feet to the airport after waking a startled Pakistani cabbie.

There was no traffic on the road yet and we made it in twenty minutes. I had the cabbie drop me off at the agency that had rented the Chevy to the Schlossers. After waking another denizen of the night, a bloodless-looking clerk with a Heavy Metal hairdo, I got directions to the turn-in lot. At this rate I'd have half the town up before dawn.

I'd just gotten settled in a dark little niche when I heard tires squealing up the ramp to the lot. The big Chevy careened onto the platform and slammed into the nearest slot, clipping the car parked next to it. The doors flew open and the "Schlossers" spewed forth. Obviously, whatever had happened as a result of my 911 call had shaken Gunnar and Kathleen.

Gunnar opened the trunk and retrieved an overnight bag. Kathleen took a moment to pat her helmet of hair back into some semblance of shape. The heavy-looking knit bag that she'd seemed so fond of before was missing. She must have ditched it back in the city in preparation for the metal detectors and X-ray machines of the airport. They walked rapidly away without a backward glance. After a few moments, I followed them into the terminal.

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At this hour the airport was only sparsely populated. Most of the airline counters were closed and deserted. The only activity seemed to be at the international gates, where clusters of people sat or reclined in various attitudes of exhaustion, and in the commuter-flight waiting areas, where tired and puffy-looking businessmen stood restlessly so as not to fall back asleep. It was easy to keep sight of my quarry, but a challenge not to be obvious about it. Especially with the ever-vigilant Kathleen. My only comfort was that I could be reasonably sure that they were unarmed. I was less confident of my new look.

They made straight for a domestic-airline waiting area, showed their tickets to security, and passed through the detector without a pause. I watched them stride down the corridor and turn into a waiting area marked B-2. I stepped back and looked at the bank of monitors in the main concourse. After scanning for a few moments, I found it. Gate B-2 for Cleveland, boarding in thirty minutes. I'll be damned, I thought. Cleveland.

This time, I didn't have to wake anyone, only get their attention. With the clock ticking down the minutes until flight time, the clerk seemed reluctant to break off her phone conversation, which appeared to be with a man and had become very friendly and animated. Five A.M., I couldn't imagine. She put him on hold and came to my aid, though she was careful not to rush. Haste makes waste. Yes, she reassured me, there were several more seats available. There were almost always some empties on these red-eye commuter flights, she explained. All of this in the most languid manner, even as the flight she was booking me for was making its first boarding announcement. Naturally, my credit card needed scanning as well and that took several more minutes. She liked my beard. I thought of the poor bastard on the other end of the phone. I hoped he wasn't in a hurry . . . for anything.

I fled down the corridor and almost made it through security. The buzzer went off and they had to look at my binoculars and camera. The waiting area was empty. I walked on board, trying to look preoccupied with my pass and keeping my face down. The stewardess quickly ushered me into an aisle seat near the front of the plane. We were already starting to back away from the terminal by the time I got my seat belt fastened.

The three rows in front of me revealed no familiar heads. That was good. With any luck, they would never have to pass me while in flight and I would beat them off the plane upon landing. It was

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killing me not to look back and see where they were, even though my neck was so rigid with tension that I doubt I would've been able to accomplish it.

With great reluctance and regret, I passed up a Bloody Mary and stuck to coffee. The perfect drink for the overwrought. The rest of the flight passed without incident and we landed right on time an hour and a half after takeoff.

I was the first off the plane and sprinted up the incline to the concourse. As soon as I hit a crowd, I stopped and turned around. Here they came. Gunnar, head and shoulders above the rest of the passengers, and Kathleen, pallid and angry-looking, with a face that would've given a pit bull second thoughts. They didn't seem to be so watchful now, and they were in a lot less of a hurry, though they were still moving with a purpose. I fell in behind them.

We entered the long-term parking lot along with hundreds of others as the working world kicked off another week. The Ohio sky was slate grey in keeping with the complexions of most of my fellow travelers. Lurch and Morticia made for a sporty-looking Beamer, fire-engine red . . . of course. As Gunnar unlocked the doors, Kathleen swung around suddenly and looked hard in my direction. If she was going to recognize me, now was the time. I didn't break stride. With nary a glance at them, I walked over to a Lincoln parked opposite their row and slammed my attaché case onto the roof. She was still watching. I patted myself down for keys. Still watching. Grunting with irritation, I dug through my pockets. Still on me. With my hand shaking so much I knew she had to notice, I began to try and fit my apartment key into the car lock. A drop of sweat ran into my eye. A car engine roared to life and two doors slammed. I turned in time to make out the license plate as the BMW roared out of the lot.

This time I had to remember it, as I couldn't force my hands to work the pen and pad.

Inside the car rental agency, I tried the phone book for Charles Schlosser. Nothing. I gave Information a call and got the same. Unlisted. Meaning, I presumed, that somewhere out there in metropolitan Cleveland, a Mr. and Mrs. Charles Schlosser did exist. Without a subpoena, the operator would not part with an address or telephone number.

I sat in the nondescript Olds that I had rented and pondered my options. If I called Walt and asked him to run the BMW's plate

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through DMV, he would want to know what I was doing. Since I really wasn't sure myself, I would be hard-pressed to answer that. Any answer I did give him I knew he would find far from reassuring. Besides, the plate could very well be under yet another alias, getting me no farther down the road.

I pulled out the crumpled piece of paper on which I'd jotted their rental information. The address stared back. *22 E. Rosemont Ave.* Could they be so cocky and arrogant as to have used their actual address? Hell, yes! For two felons who were supposed to be locked up in another state, they seemed to have the world by the butt. What I couldn't get over was that no one seemed to be missing them. Why wasn't the countryside being scoured for these scumbags? Being of an inquiring mind, I consulted my complimentary city map, put her into drive, and embarked for the pleasant-sounding Rosemont Ave.

The neighborhood was one of those older, middle-class sections that had largely escaped urban blight. Most were attractive, well-built homes from the fifties and holding up well, though they exhibited some signs of neglect. I surmised that this was due to the fact that most housed their original owners, who were not as spry as they had once been. Occasionally, an old pensioner would sally forth to do battle with weeds and other gardening chores.

A number of homes appeared to have fallen to the younger generation as evidenced by new paint jobs, additions, and children's toys in the yards. All in all, a very comfortable, neat community. With one glaring exception. 22 E. Rosemont.

The lawn was knee-high with overgrown grass and weeds, and broken lawn furniture was scattered across it as if to impede the unwary. Dusty-looking curtains covered every window and the white stucco of the walls was sooty and streaked with dirt in places. It had the look of a place where the former owners would likely be found buried in the crawl space.

The attached one-car garage was closed when I arrived and hadn't opened since, so I had no idea whether the red Beamer was there or not. No one had come or gone and I'd seen no signs of life. School had let out about an hour ago and the neighborhood kids were beginning to notice me. If their parents had done their job, one of them would report home with their "suspicious man" story soon and Mom would probably call the local station for a patrol car. I figured I had thirty more minutes, at most.

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A knot of kids were using the Schlosser's driveway as a skateboard ramp. Occasionally, there was a surreptitious hand-off of a well-worn pack of cigarettes and one of their number would drift off behind some shrubs. Lazy tendrils of smoke rose into the late-afternoon air to reveal the secret smoker's position. I felt myself starting to doze. I couldn't remember the last time I'd really slept.

The garage door began to rise; there was the whine of an automatic opener. I shook myself, trying to wake up. The kids pantomimed hasty goodbyes. Behind me, at the corner, I heard the screech of tires. My rearview mirror showed a red car making a hard left onto the street. I glanced back at the garage, which was now fully open, and saw that it was empty. The kids scattered, keeping to the sidewalk. They not only knew the Schlosser's routine, but with the unerring intuition of the very young, had guessed something about their personalities. They surrendered the street as the car hurtled past and made another hard left into the drive. I just had time to catch a glimpse of the occupants and the license plate before it vanished into the garage. The door was closing before they'd even gotten under it. I half-expected the Beamer to continue on through the back wall of the house as the heavy wooden door slid to a stop. From deep within, I heard the sound of two doors being slammed. The number matched with the car Gunnar and Kathleen drove from the airport. The Schlossers were home.

The local stop-and-rob provided me with enough nutritious rations to see me through the night, and I returned a little after dark. I parked a few doors down and pondered my options. Going in and arresting them was out of the question. First of all, they would kill me, and I didn't want that. Second, I wasn't a cop anymore and even if I had been, I was way out of my jurisdiction. Third, I didn't have anything but circumstantial evidence that they had committed the murders back home, and as far as their being fugitives, I seemed to be the only one who thought so. It all boiled down to proving that the Schlossers were, in fact, Gunnar Bergstrom and Kathleen Vichter. If I had that, Walt would have to act. At the very least, official inquiries would be started. I had faith that the rest would come out in the wash.

With that in mind, I carefully cleaned the telephoto lens of my thirty-five millimeter and waited. Sooner or later, I'd get a shot of them. More than that, I intended to break into their cozy residence

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and help myself to a few well-handled objects. Fingerprints don't lie.

The twin beams of the headlamps caught me before I had a chance to slump down in my seat. I sat very still as the car swung to the curb in front of Gunnar's and stopped. I was praying for invisibility as a trim man in a business suit hopped out and waded through the yard to the Schlossers' front door. It occurred to me that he knew his way through the jungle pretty well. He only knocked once before the door was opened and the darkened porch was flooded with light. I could hear Gunnar's greeting float across the street to where I sat. Gunnar was smiling as he clapped him on the back and ushered him in. Business Suit was smiling also. Just before the door closed I heard Kathleen chirp, "Get you anything to drink, Bill?" What the hell? I expected the Beav to come pedaling up any moment.

Easing the car door closed, I trotted over to Business Suit's car. Chevy Caprice four-door. Late model. Two antennas mounted on the rear. One was for a car phone. Pretty typical these days. The other was for a two-way radio. I suddenly felt very thirsty. I risked a look at the interior with my pocket flash. Sure enough, a police band radio was mounted under the dash. I wobbled back to my car and sat.

Business Suit came out after about an hour and drove away. I gave it a couple of beats and followed. It wasn't hard. He was used to doing the tailing, not the other way around, and never looked back. When he turned into the garage for employees in the federal building, I kept going. I knew all I needed to know. Business Suit was a federal agent. Gunnar and Kathleen were in the Witness Protection Program.

On the flight home I tried to think things through, but all I could think about were the cocktails being served to my fellow travelers. It seemed like everybody in the plane was knocking them back. I think they were even serving the kids. I could almost hear the tinkle of glasses raised in toasts behind the closed cockpit door. I closed my eyes and squeezed the armrests.

Now it all made sense. The feds must have picked them up even before they got to trial. That explained the easy plea bargain and why the prison bureau carried them on their rolls. They never spent a day inside. They were too valuable, too busy being pumped for information on the workings of the mob to risk in prison.

It also explained why the feds were so successful with mob enforcement after Gunnar and Kathleen got "sent up." All us local yokels

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thought it was just a crackdown as a result of the hue and cry over Johnny Joggs's burning. It was, of course, but it was a crackdown with inside information. The feds had made a bargain with the devil, devils actually, and the end justified the means.

Now, over a decade later, the leash on Bergstrom and Vichter had grown long and frayed. Nobody was paying them much attention anymore. They did what they promised to do and kept their noses clean in the meantime. Occasionally, once a week or so, an agent dropped by to see how they were making out. Only on workdays, of course. Why spoil their weekend? No guns or drugs in the house . . . have a nice day. See you next week. So they burned and tortured a few people to death. Basically they were good kids.

Who could I turn to? I felt certain Walt didn't know anything about the arrangement and even if I convinced him, what could he do? Go to the feds? They would send him packing posthaste. None of your business, it's a federal matter.

If I went to the feds myself, they would want proof, not allegations. After all, they had a lot on the line here. This could be a major embarrassment. It would be easy to discredit a broken-down old ex-cop with a drinking problem.

I fell asleep and dreamt of the old days. Old friends and old enemies, cops and robbers, good guys and bad. Some dead and a few still living. The bump of the tires on the tarmac woke me just as a tumbler of amber liquid reached my lips.

The public library has become one of my favorite spots on earth. I love the quiet, restful murmur of the place. It's very much like a church that way. I discovered it shortly after my return from Cleveland when I came in looking for out-of-town newspapers. I spend most afternoons here now and the employees are kind enough to wake me only when I snore.

Today I had to go to the desk to ask for change for the copy machine. The librarian actually smiled at me when she handed me back my quarters. And these are public employees! She pointed out the location of the copier and asked if she could help. Even though I wasn't too familiar with their particular model, I decided to go it alone. I wasn't really too keen on her seeing the article I wanted copied. She might have thought I was a little strange.

The article concerns a couple by the name of Schlosser in a suburb of Cleveland. It seems they were burned to death in their own home sometime during the night. The fire department was able to salvage

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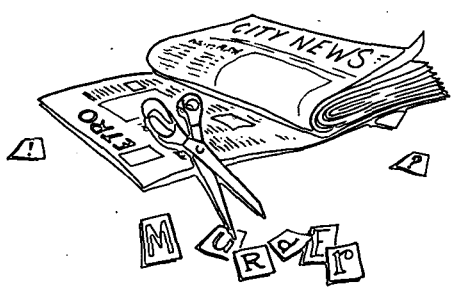
most of the house and the police were labeling the fire as arson and the deaths suspicious. Interestingly, the FBI was also investigating, though agents there would make no comment to the press on their interest in what would normally be a local case. The article quoted a neighbor as saying that the Schlossers kept pretty much to themselves.

Now, I can't tell Walt about what I found out and how I was right about Gunnar and Kathleen. In fact, I haven't told anybody except one person. A nobody, really. Just an old snitch who used to bring me the odd tidbit of information back when I was on the streets. Of course, I can't vouch for who he might have told. You know how snitches are. When they've got information that's worth something, they usually find the persons it's worth something to.

Somewhere back in Cleveland there's an agent in trouble. Business Suit is probably racking his brains trying to figure out how the mob found the lovely Schlossers and torched them. I chuckle thinking about the whole situation, and the librarian gives me a curious look. I smile back at her and she blushes. You've got to admit, the boys who did that job had a sense of irony.

I hang the newspaper back on its rack and make for the door. I tip my hat to the librarian on the way out. Walt and I have an appointment this afternoon. He's agreed to drive me over to my first AA meeting and hold my hand.



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Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine, Vol. 105, No. 2, Whole No. 639, February 1995. Published every 28 days which includes special issues in March and October by Dell Magazines, a division of Bantam Doubleday Dell Magazines, at $2.50 a copy in the U.S.A., $3.25 in Canada. 1 year subscription $34.97 in U.S.A. and possessions, $44.97 elsewhere, payable in advance and in U.S. funds (GST included in Canada). Allow 6 to 8 weeks for change of address. Call 800-333-3053 with questions about your subscription. Editorial and Executive Offices, 1540 Broadway, N.Y., N.Y. 10036. Subscription orders and mail regarding subscriptions should be sent to Ellery Queen, P.O. Box 5127, Harlan, IA 51593-5127. Second-class postage paid at New York, N.Y. and at additional mailing offices. Canadian postage paid at Windsor, Ontario. Canada Post International Publications Mail, Product Sales Agreement No. 260649.

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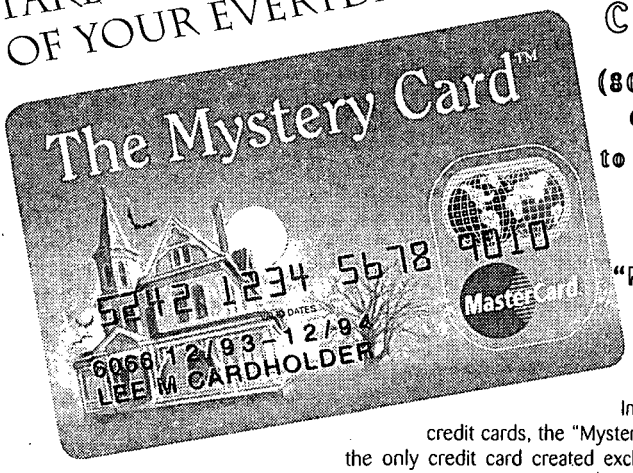

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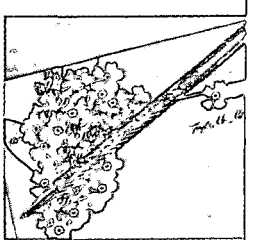

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